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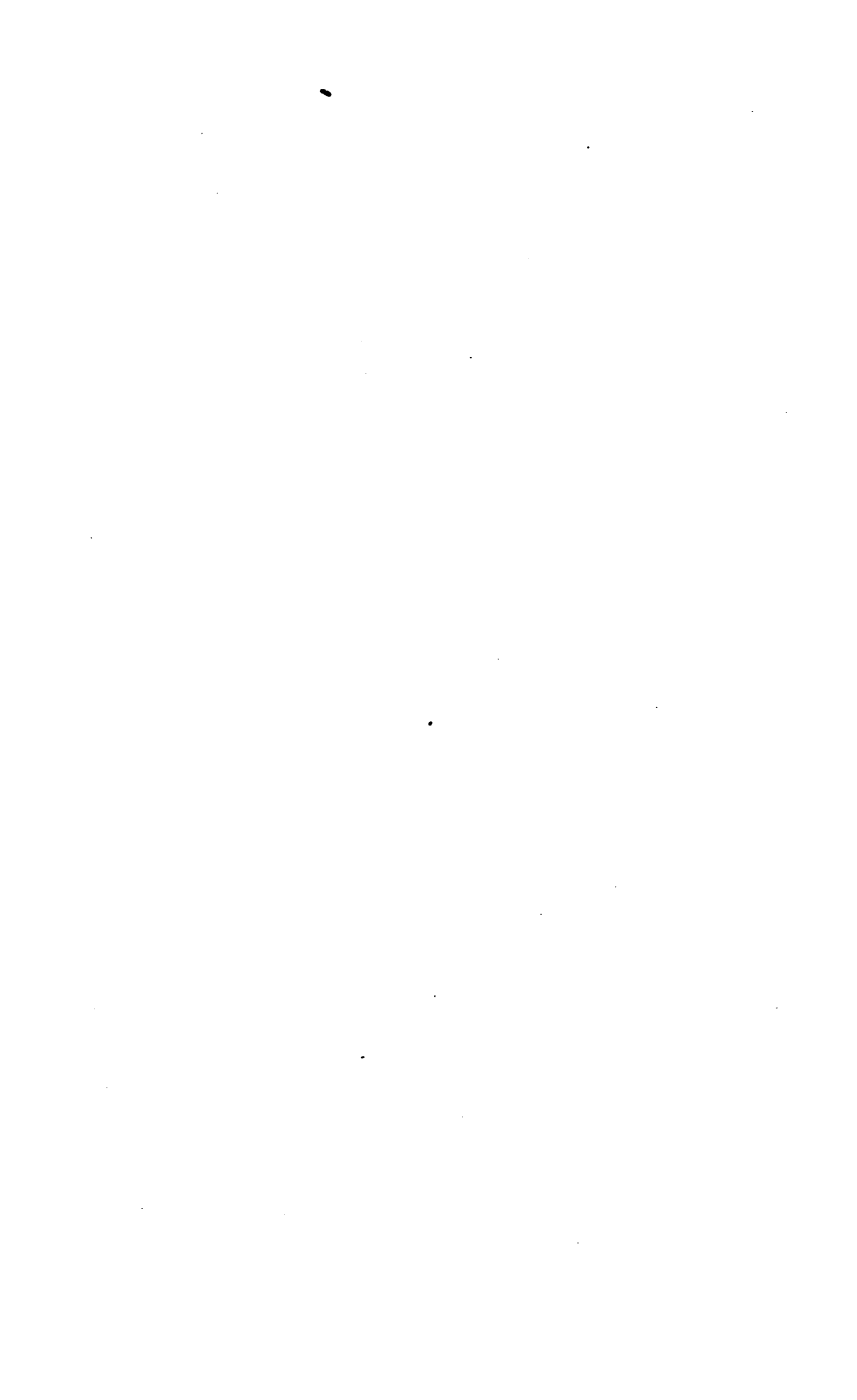
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The Knight *of* The Silver Star

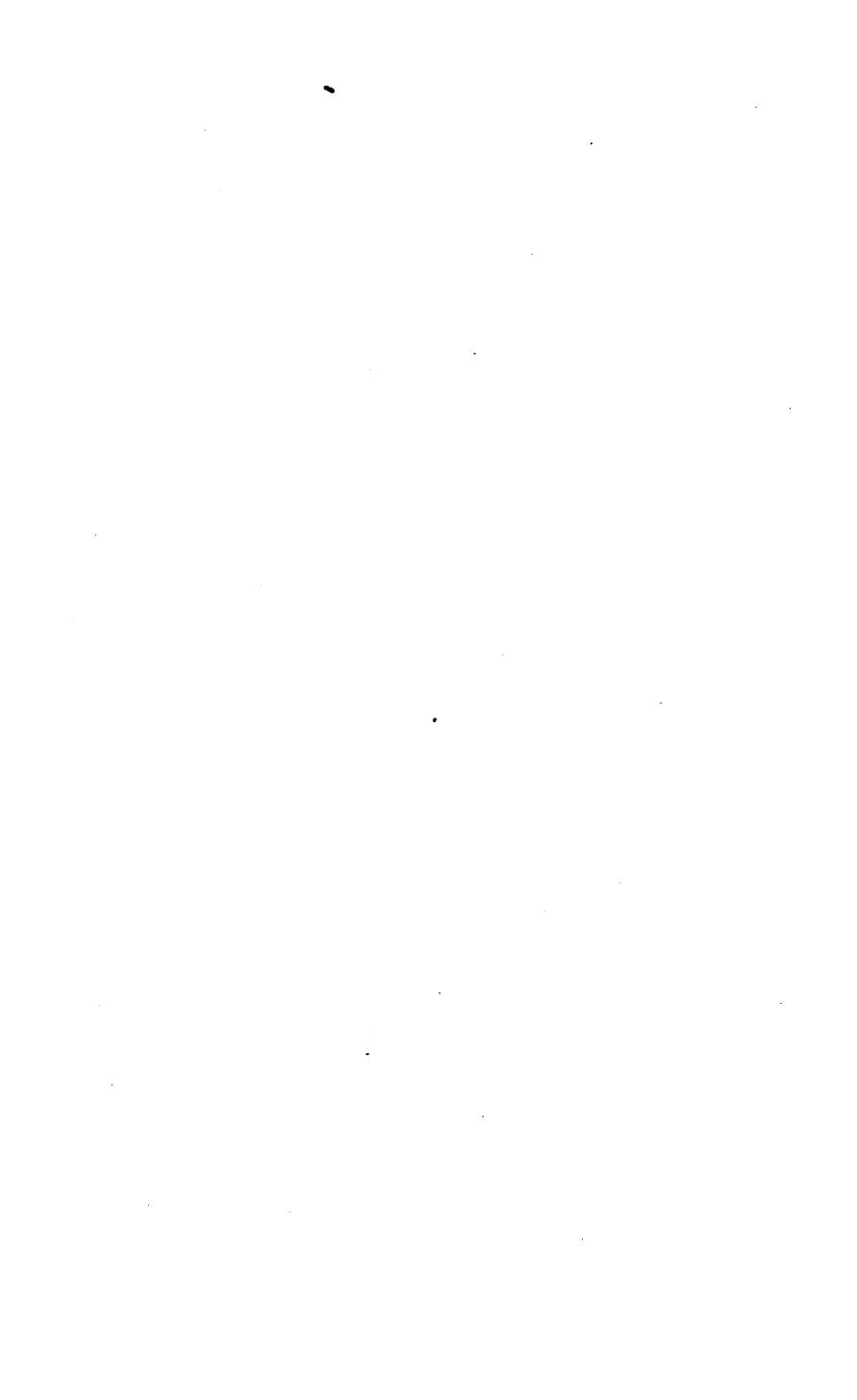
By

PERCY BREBNER

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THE KNIGHT OF THE SILVER STAR

BY
PERCY BREBNER

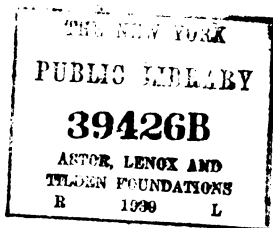
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The Knight of the Silver Star

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DARIA II
DARIA III
WITH THE AUTHOR'S HOMAGE

W. B. E. S. S. O. M.

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The Knight of the Silver Star

CHAPTER I

THE DREAMER.

THE sun dropped behind the snow-capped mountains to the westward as, at the summit of the road, I came upon the village of Brâyle.

I shifted my knapsack from my shoulders, and leaning upon my staff, stood contemplating one of the most glorious panoramas my eyes had ever rested upon. Behind me, to the north, stretching away eastward and westward, the great mountain range lifted its frowning tops to heaven, and in the last glow of sunset they were bathed in every tone of color the mind of man can concieve, changing every moment from yellow to gold, from gold to burnished copper, from copper to a blood-red, which gradually turned to purple, growing deeper and deeper as darkness crept up the mountain sides. To the south and south-west, from whence I had come, the world fell down towards verdure and cultivation, and lands watered by streams, which grew slowly, and joined together into a river far away towards the horizon.

As evening came rapidly over the lower lands, and a chill wind struck the mountain road, I entered the village, and went towards a long low building, which seemed likely to afford a resting-place for the night. All the dwellings—a couple of dozen of them perhaps—were built low, to offer less resistance to the wind-storms which so constantly sweep down from the mountains. I had to bend my head as I stepped down from the roadway through a narrow door into a bare room, where four men were sitting at a rough table smoking and drinking. The thin wine looked poor comfort; but a big log was crackling musically on an enormous hearth, throwing a ruddy glow on to the weatherbeaten faces of the drinkers. They were in eager, if not an angry conversation, but stopped as I entered, and looked at me in surprise. One of them seemed delighted at my advent, for, after a moment's pause, he cried out excitedly—

“The proof! The proof! Look, here is one of them!”

Another man, whom I rightly took to be the proprietor of the establishment, growled savagely at him to be silent, and then rose and saluted me.

“You’re going no further to-night?” he queried.

“No.”

It seemed a tolerably foolish question, since it was already dark.

“You are a traveler—just an ordinary traveler?”

“Yes, oh, yes,” I answered.

There was something in his tone which had the effect of taking the conceit out of one. I have never considered myself quite an ordinary traveler.

“You see, Mustapha!” he said in triumph.

The man addressed looked at me fixedly, but did

not speak. He had sprung excitedly from his seat at my entrance.

"I want to stay here to-night," I went on. "To-morrow I may go further, or the next day, or it may be next week. It all depends what I find to interest me. There is a fine waterfall near Brâyle, I have heard."

"And many more sights," said the landlord, scenting a profitable customer.

"Is it only for this you have come?" asked Mustapha, with some contempt.

"Yes," I answered, throwing down my knapsack, and spreading out my hands to the blaze. "What else should I have come for?"

The disappointment in the man's face was quite comical, and his companions burst out laughing.

"Take no notice of what he says," laughed the landlord. "Mustapha is a dreamer. He sees armies along the mountain-tops when others see only snow. He hears the ring of steel in every tinkling goat-bell, and the shout of war in the bark of every dog. A wonderful dreamer is Mustapha."

"I said nothing of armies; I said armed men," the dreamer returned sullenly.

"I am not armed," I observed.

"Many of the men I have seen are not armed," he returned, "but they are no ordinary travelers. They all go the same way—yonder."

He was a striking figure in the red firelight, short of stature, but lithe and sinewy. His face was eager, his eyes sparkled with enthusiasm, and the muscles of his neck stood out like cords. His attitude was unconsciously dramatic as he stretched out his arm, pointing towards the mountains to the north.

"Where is yonder?" I asked, more for the sake of saying something than because I wanted to know.

By a "dreamer" I supposed a harmless lunatic was meant. A long sojourn in Brâyle would, I imagined, be enough to try the resisting power of the strongest brain.

His arm dropped to his side, and he shook his head.

"I only know the legend which everybody knows, and which everybody laughs at; but I am wiser than everybody, because I don't laugh."

A roar of merriment greeted this assertion. I could not help joining in it.

"Let me eat first, and then we'll have the story. The story will wait, and my hunger is too ripe to keep."

I ordered more wine, which put me on a friendly footing with my companions at once—as such an action is sure to do, the wide world over—and my landlord busied himself to get my supper, or, to be quite correct, ordered his wife about a great deal, which served the same purpose.

Of necessity, in this history, I must talk of myself. I am the hero of it, and he's a poor hero indeed who isn't worth talking about. I was a wanderer by inclination not of necessity, and although not actually seeking adventure, I was not unwilling to enjoy some mild form of enterprise should such come my way, but I little thought of the strange experiences which lay before me. If at the end of this narrative the reader should sneer, and wonder why I troubled to write about myself and my adventures, I can only refer him to a few of my personal friends who persuaded me to write. With them must lie the respon-

sibility. Few people, even if they are interested, will believe the story, and will say of me, as was said of Mustapha, "He is a stupid dreamer." To these I can honestly confess that I should sometimes doubt the history myself, had I not always before me one incontestable proof of the truth of it. For my personal appearance, I stand over six feet, am broad-shouldered and athletic, have fair hair, and am clean-shaven, and I believe there are less well-favored men in the world than myself; all of which details may appear trivial, but are not really so, as will presently appear.

Brâyle lies, if indeed there is still a village there, at the foot of one of the southern spurs of the great Caucasian range. It is an out-of-the-way place, which probably few tourists have discovered. I am not an ordinary tourist. I have a rooted objection to guide-books of every description; and to have the places worth seeing in a neighborhood catalogued for me, is detestable. I invariably steer clear of such places, which may be foolish, but is nevertheless my rule. I had never heard of Brâyle until I was within a day's journey of it, and then was told that there was nothing to see there except a waterfall, which was not worth seeing; so I went, feeling relieved that there was little chance of meeting any of Mr. Cook's ticketed sheep, or of being asked afterwards: "Oh, Mr. Verrall, have you been to Brâyle?"

Hating guide-books, I will not attempt a long descriptive paragraph of the mountains. Of late years a good deal has been written about the range, and the military operations of Russia have doubtless caused changes since the time I write of. It is enough to say that, while the slopes of the western

range are clad in verdure, the central range, as it may be called, is arid, rocky, and desolate. Of comparatively uniform height, the mountain-tops rise majestically into the region of perpetual snow. There are, practically speaking, no passes, only here and there a goat track, dizzy enough to contemplate, of a mountaineer's zig-zag path which leads nowhere in particular, and in the neighborhood of Brâyle, sheer rock rises perpendicularly from the mountain road which runs through the village. So to my story.

Supper finished, and a briar pipe set going, I suggested another log on the fire, more wine—it was very thin wine and harmless—and Mustapha's tale. The man had drunk at my expense, or I do not think he would have told the legend. Once started, however, he became very excited over it, and his manner of telling it was fascinating.

"It's little I know," he said. "Every one knows nearly as much, only they do not believe. Long ago, long before Brâyle existed, somewhere near here there was a pass from this side of the mountains to a country beyond. There was constant intercourse between the people on this side of the mountains and that country, whose inhabitants, though different, were friendly. The men were strong and warlike, and the women more than beautiful, far superior to ours, it is said, and the wealth of the country was enormous. In the King's treasury were stored gold, and silver, and precious stones, greater wealth than man could name. It was a pleasant country, too, warm and sunny, for the great mountains shut it in and sheltered it. Its fields yielded rich harvests, and its wine was not like this we drink, but generous, such as I have heard is known in Western Europe.

They were a strong people, and, therefore, dwelt in safety; a contented people, and, therefore, happy. A day came when the pass was no more. It was a year of fierce storms, such as had not been known until that time, nor have been since; floods were in the lower lands, sweeping away village after village, and in the mountains were shakings, rumblings, and great earthquakes. Mountains split asunder and changed their shapes. Great snow-drifts and ice-walls rushed down from the heights and buried the land where we now are for weeks; and when the storms were over, the pass was gone. The mountain walls of it had split and fallen in, shutting that fair land out of the world for ever."

"The legend improves with every telling," said the landlord.

"And it's all a lie," said one of the other men contemptuously. "No one has been more upon the mountains than I have, no one knows them better than I do, as every one in Brâyle can tell. There are difficult paths leading only to snow-capped, impassable ridges, where a wild goat dare not venture, and there are deep torrent gorges which have never been bridged. I've been lost a day and a night upon the mountains, and know every inch of them that is to be known. It's all a tale. Mustapha is a stupid dreamer."

He poured the remainder of his wine down his throat as though he had settled the matter once and for all time.

"If one could cross the mountains far enough, there is Russia," said the landlord, rather proud of his geographical knowledge.

I nodded. I thought he had probably struck the

right nail home. Indeed, I was not at all sure that the history of the Flood had not helped the legend. Deep waters were in the lowlands, the story said, and we were near enough to Mount Ararat to make my theory possible, if not probable.

Mustapha watched me. My criticism was the only one he cared about. His companions' jeers he had heard often enough before.

"I thought it all a tale once," he said, when I made no comment. "I know better now. There was, until lately, a wise woman in Brâyle, and she told me much of this strange country."

"And that same woman was killed three months back for her wisdom," savagely returned the man who knew the mountains so well. "She was a great dreamer and a devil, and one of her victims found her out, and killed her. Look to yourself, Mustapha. A sharp sword well swung is a rude awakening from dreams."

Mustapha took no notice of him.

"Only a few weeks before her death she told me a great deal," he went on. "She told me that though the pass was destroyed, there remained a secret entrance to this fair country through the mountains, and that she had seen armed men going there. I did not believe it, and I laughed, but now I laugh no more."

"A sharp sword and a swinging arm. Look to yourself, Mustapha," said the other man.

"Fools believe nothing but what they see," burst out Mustapha angrily. "If they could sleep before darkness, and wake at dawn, they would declare there was no night just because they had not seen it. I have seen these strange men more than once."

"Where?" I asked.

"On the road you will take to-morrow if you travel to the east. I will show you the place."

"Very well, you shall show me to-morrow," I answered.

His face brightened suddenly, as a landscape does in a gleam of sunlight on an April day. There was no harm in humoring the poor fellow a little, for he had evidently been much abused by his neighbors.

"We will start early, Mustapha," I said, as I prepared to go to rest for the night.

"I shall wake at dawn," he answered.

"And you will return?" asked the landlord.

"We shall be back before sunset, ready for an excellent supper," I answered.

Back before sunset! I little knew how many sunsets would sink into night before I saw Brâyle again.

CHAPTER II**INTO A NEW COUNTRY**

THE morning was brilliant, but excessively cold. I was warmly clad, and further fortified with a large flask of brandy in my pocket. I took a steel-tipped staff! but, as I intended to return to Brâyle, I left my knapsack behind. There was little in it to tempt the landlord if he were disposed to be dishonest.

Laughing at his last injunction to keep an eye on my mad comrade, Mustapha and I departed. For a long time he walked at my side without a word, evidently delighted to go with me, and every now and then he hummed a little snatch of a song to himself. He had told me, before we started, that the place he wished to show me was close to the fall, and was not a great distance from Brâyle. The idea of the fall had caused him some amusement. He did not think I really wanted to go there, thought that I had mentioned it only to mislead the landlord, and that I believed his story. Poor Mustapha! I can see him now swinging along the road, humming his little snatches of song.

“How far is the fall?” I asked presently.

“Some way yet; but we shall not have to go as far as that.”

He stopped and faced me.

"The place I spoke of is nearer than the fall."

"But we can go on afterwards," I answered.

His jaw fell, and the merriment went out of his face in a moment.

"I thought you believed the tale I told last night—that you might even know that I spoke truly. I came with you to go to this country. For many days it has been in my mind to go there, but, alone, I was afraid."

The landlord was right—the man was mad. Madmen are dangerous, and I determined to be careful.

"Why should we go?" I asked, to humor him.

"Why not? Is Brâyle so wonderful a place that one would choose to live in it always and to die in it?"

"You are ambitious."

I did not remind him that I was not of Brâyle, or that in the world there are places worth living in. Where a man died seemed to me of little moment.

"Ambitious! Yes, I am dreamer enough for that. Have you no ambition? Beyond these mountains there is wealth, there is beauty, there is adventure. With you I shall have courage. Let us go together. I will be your slave."

Adventure! There he touched me in a tender place. For wealth I had no great longing—I had sufficient—and for beauty, was not Europe full of it? But adventure! Something in the keen air made me thirst for it at that moment. What if this man were not a dreamer? What if the legend were true?

"Show me where you saw these strange men," was all I said.

Mustapha required no second bidding; perhaps

he understood something of what was passing through my mind. He started on again at such a rapid pace that I had some difficulty in keeping up with him.

Presently he stopped.

"This is the place."

We had reached a point where the road we had been traveling began to descend. It had been a gentle rise all the way from Brâyle. The road curved out of sight round the mountain, and I could hear the sound of falling water. From the roadway a path branched off up the side of the mountain, a steep zig-zag path, but nothing out of the way to a climber.

"I hid yonder," said Mustapha, pointing to a rocky boulder a few yards distant on the opposite side of the road. "I heard them coming up the road—not from Brâyle, the other way; and then they went up this path until they disappeared round the shoulder of the mountain there. It was sunset when they went, and I waited all night, and all the next day, but they did not return. Somewhere here is the entrance to that country. It is for us to find it."

His every nerve was at the greatest tension. I doubt if any man has so thoroughly believed in anything as Mustapha did in that legend.

"The fall is not far from here," I said.

"No you can hear it. Shall we go?" he said, pointing up the mountain.

"We may as well see where it goes to," I answered. "Paths usually lead somewhere."

Mustapha literally sprang forward as dogs do after their prey, and I caught the fever of the discoverer. For some distance the path was compara-

tively easy, and then gradually it became more difficult, and was like the dried-up bed of a torrent. My companion tried to prevent my noticing the difficulty of the way by keeping up a rattling conversation about anything and everything he could think of. No doubt he was exceedingly afraid that I should get disgusted, and turn back.

His efforts, however, were quite unnecessary, for the further we went, the more determined was I to go on to the end. Every enthusiastic climber will easily understand the feeling, that almost mad craving to get to the top. The path became steeper and more difficult as we proceeded, winding round the side of the mountain, which on one hand rose sheer above us for hundreds of feet, bare rock straight as a wall, and on the other went almost as straight downwards, not a tuft of vegetation anywhere. Snow patches lay at intervals as we ascended, and so narrow was the path in places that the utmost caution was necessary. I should hardly have got along without my staff. For two hours we trudged forwards, talking little, for even Mustapha began to find he had no breath to waste.

Presently we stopped.

The path had been little more than a foothold for some time, now it practically came to an end. The mountain wall turned sharp, almost at right angles, but the path did not turn with it. Before us was a narrow ridge, which bridged a ravine; and where the ridge joined the mountain on the other side, the path seemed to go on again. It looked as though some great convulsion of nature had torn back the mountains, leaving the ridge where the path had been. The ridge was at least seven feet below where

we were standing, and was covered with snow lying lightly upon the surface, but no doubt hard and slippery underneath. I looked at my companion, and, for the first time, he hesitated.

"How could they take horses across that?" he said reflectively.

"Horses!"

"Yes, some of the men had horses."

I suddenly concluded that I was a fool, and that Mustapha was indeed a madman. Horses might, with considerable difficulty, have been got up the first quarter of a mile of the path, but certainly not an inch further.

"There must be another way," he mused.

"Most probably," I answered dryly.

"That is easy enough for a man," he said, pointing to the ridge; "but for a horse—no."

Easy! He did not mean it. I saw that in his eyes. He was frightened that I should turn back, and so great was his enthusiasm, or his madness, that even such a difficulty as this would not stop him. I certainly should have turned back, but before I could put my determination into words, Mustapha had let himself down from the path, and, hanging for a moment with his hands to steady himself, dropped on to the ridge.

"It is hard and safe!" he exclaimed.

Luckily my height and length of arm enabled me to get a firm footing before I let go with my hands, or this history would never have been written. It was not courage that prompted this fool-hardiness, which was little short of criminal, it was simply that British obstinacy which cannot bear to be beaten by a foreigner. Mustapha had dared to get upon the

ridge, and I must, therefore, do the same. It was barely two feet wide, and the distance across was at least fifty yards. I confess that I turned sick as on my hands and knees I crawled after Mustapha. I kept my eyes upon him, to have looked down would have been fatal, and I am no white-livered climber either. I have felt few such moments of relief as that, when having climbed safely up on to the opposite path, I turned to look back at the way we had come. It appeared worse, if possible, from this side than from the other, and I could hardly believe that we had accomplished the perilous journey.

"Look!" Mustapha exclaimed.

We had clambered into safety none too soon. Loosened by our weight, the snow and ice broke from either side of the ridge, rattling down into the depths below, waking growling echoes, and leaving in many places only a knife-edge of rock visible.

"It is well we didn't see all the danger when we stood on the other side," said my companion.

"We must go on now," I answered, after a pause. "There is no return that way."

"We don't want to go back," he replied, secretly delighted, I think, that retreat was impossible.

The path widened, and was not so difficult as it had been. We made fairly rapid progress, and a pull at the flask put new determination into me. Mustapha drank some brandy, too—not that his courage wanted stimulating.

"That boaster who knows the mountains so well, never traversed this path, I warrant," he said presently.

"Probably not."

"Do you believe my story now?"

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"Well, Mustapha, doubtless this path leads somewhere," I answered cautiously.

"It leads to that fair country of wealth, and beauty, and adventure," he said, with conviction.

It was now far on in the afternoon, and darkness would soon overtake us. The prospect of spending the night on that narrow ledge was not a pleasant one, besides which, a few hard biscuits and the brandy were all we had to eat and drink.

"What is to be done, Mustapha?" I said. "In an hour or two it will be dark."

"I am not afraid with you," he answered quickly. "At daybreak we can go on again."

"If we are not frozen during the night."

"I have known it colder, much colder than this," he said.

"We are warm with walking and climbing. Wait until we stop."

"We must find a sheltered place and keep ourselves awake and warm. We can easily do that."

"And how about food?" I asked, thinking of the supper I had expected to have on my return to Brâyle.

"Ah! I had not thought of that."

"No, my brave Mustapha, I should think not. I doubt if either of us will ever see Brâyle again. How does that prospect suit you?"

It did not seem to trouble him much.

"We must get as far as we can before darkness comes," he said light-heartedly. "Every step we take brings us nearer to food in plenty."

In the hope that we might find a wider spot to pass a wakeful night upon, we proceeded. But, instead of widening, the path narrowed again and became more

difficult than it had been since we crossed the bridge. It was little more than a ledge winding round the rocks, and we had constantly to climb over boulders which had fallen from the heights above. I had not yet made up my mind to believe in the legend, but that there should be a path at all in such a place, was certainly curious. Perhaps we should presently find ourselves in the midst of some mountain tribe, in a place which could have been reached by another and easier road. We were gradually descending, but so winding was the path that it was impossible to see what was ahead of us. So persistently, however, did one snow-capped peak keep coming into view in various positions, that I concluded we were traveling in a circular direction. The peak was a landmark. I had noticed it first, soon after we had crossed the bridge, and I looked for it as we rounded every shoulder of the mountains. Presently it came into sight again away to our left, and seemed to be situated at the head of the valley which lay below us. This time I saw that its white head was golden, slowly deepening in color and changing into more sombre tints. Looking down, I saw darkness creeping up from the valley, stealthily, as if to surprise us. I stopped Mustapha, and pointed first to the peak and then to the valley.

"Our day's work is over," I said. "It is a perilous resting-place you and I will have to-night."

"A little further," he answered. "Daylight dies slowly at this height. Do you not see that the valley is not so deep? We are descending, and the valley is rising. This path will bring us down."

"Not before night."

“Perhaps not, but yonder the path widens into a platform. We can reach that before dark.”

The place he pointed out certainly looked more promising, but that we should obtain more standing room was hardly encouraging enough to materially lessen my anxiety. We were without food, and until a man has calmly faced this fact, he is quite unable to understand what it means. A man may have all the pluck of all the heroes of all the centuries in his breast, but it is absolutely useless unless he has food in his stomach. Hercules, hungry, would have curled up at the mere sight of his labors, let alone the doing of them. Further, there was no certainty of what was before us. Going on might be, indeed probably was, so much time wasted. Time has a new significance for one who has only a few hard biscuits in his pockets. Still, for us there was no returning. The bridge we had crossed could not be re-crossed. To go on was the only thing to do, and my fever for discovery cooled down to considerably below zero as the snowpeak faded into darkness, and a death-grey mist filled the valley and crept slowly up the mountain sides towards us.

Mustapha pressed on, picking his steps carefully. Before us was a broad platform, snow-covered, but with plenty of space to move about on. Beyond the platform the path, narrower than ever, disappeared round the mountain. It was not an encouraging prospect for the morrow.

Nothing depressed Mustapha, however.

“Had we a bottle of wine, we could spend a merry night,” he said, pointing to the platform.

“Fifty bottles would not have that effect upon me.”

"No," he answered solemnly. "You would be drunk."

Taking the wine of Brâyle as a standard, I rather doubted this. Very ill I might be, but hardly drunk.

"You are not enthusiastic," he said.

"No, I'm hungry."

"What of that? We shall eat the more to-morrow."

"To-morrow! How?"

"The people where we are going, eat, I suppose?"

This was simple and childlike faith with a vengeance, but it was powerless to inspire me with confidence.

"We shall laugh and feast to-morrow, though we fast to-night."

He laughed as he stepped upon the snow-carpeted platform—a light, happy laugh, that my memory has often re-echoed as I have sat alone thinking—and then he shrieked, a cry that cut the still air as with the sweep of a sharp scimitar. He made a violent effort to step back upon the path and failed.

"The staff!" I shouted, stretching it towards him as he threw up his arms.

I dug my heels into the ground, endeavoring to get a firm footing, Mustapha caught the staff, his whole weight was upon it for a moment, and my strength, with such an inscure foothold, was unequal to the sudden jerk. I had not even time to let go the staff, and I fell forwards.

Barely five seconds could have elapsed from the moment Mustapha laughed to the moment I became conscious that I was sliding rapidly downwards. I felt shaken, but unhurt, and I must have turned a complete somersault, for I was on my back, my feet

foremost. Luckily, my staff was still in my hands, and the light snow was rolling away from my feet, doubtless checking my speed a little, but it was not deep enough for me either to stop myself or even to regulate my pace, which was tremendous. I lifted my head to prevent it striking any unevenness, and I spread out my arms and my staff to steady myself and to keep myself from rolling. It was too dark to see many yards before me, and it was impossible to tell what was below. Was the end to be a sudden shoot out into space, and a cruel death on the rocks below?

The snow hardened, and I was bumped and bruised and torn. I had the greatest difficulty in keeping my legs foremost, and I knew that the only chance of escape I had depended on my doing this. It is wonderful that I kept my presence of mind as I did, and that I had sense enough to cling pertinaciously to my staff. I remember speculating how Mustapha would get on with nothing in his hands. From the moment I had been jerked forwards until now, I had not thought of him. It is natural to become self-centered under such circumstances.

Something suddenly came by me swiftly—so close to me that, had I heard it coming, I could have touched it with my staff. It is strange that it did not startle me into carelessness of my own position. It was rolling over and over, bounding forwards whenever it struck any unevenness in the surface. It might have been a great ball of snow launched from the heights above, only that, as it rolled, parts of it fell away for a moment with curious regularity, now forwards, now backwards, and now on either side.

In the dim twilight I saw it roll ahead of me, and

then as I watched it, fascinated and fearful, I saw it roll away from me towards the left. The next instant I felt that I too was being drawn in the same direction. The knowledge came not a fraction of time too soon, and I dug my staff in to keep myself in a straight course, for to the left there was a straight, sharply-defined black line, and nothing beyond it, and there was the sound of rushing water. I succeeded in keeping myself from being drawn to the left, but I accelerated my speed. The way was hard and smooth, and I dashed down, going faster than the rolling mass before me. It was on a lower level than I was, and I got abreast of it as it came to the straight black line. Then—— Good God, it was horrible! As I passed it upon my straight course, the ball gave a final bound and shot out over the black line into space, no longer a ball but a man, arms and legs wide spread.

“Mustapha!” I cried; and my cry rang out and echoed away into the silence of the night, but there was no answer.

A moment later I plunged into loose snow, and came to rest. Half stunned, I lay quite still for a while, and then I picked myself up, wondering if there were any help for Mustapha.

The sudden red glare of a torch flared up and dazzled me. I saw the gleam of it flash pointedly to my breast along a steel blade, and then a stentorian voice rang out—

“In the King’s name, halt!”

CHAPTER III**CAPTAIN DENNIS O'RYAN**

HALT! It never occurred to me to do anything else. I was dazed, and hardly able to stand. The challenge had brought others upon the scene, and half-a-dozen torches danced fiercely before my eyes. The sword was still pointed towards my breast, and I concluded that in coolness lay my only chance.

"I am unarmed," I said.

"We don't cut courtesy so fine as that in this country. The blow first and the pardon-begging afterwards." He laughed as he lowered his sword. "Who are you, and how the devil did you get here?"

"Just slid," I answered. "A few moments ago I was on the mountains somewhere behind me."

"And by Saint Patrick, you're English, with a touch of Irish blood in you for choice."

"Pure English."

"Faith, and I'm sorry for that. You're plucky enough to be an Irishman."

I was too bewildered to be surprised at so strange a meeting. My only clear thought was that an Irishman with a drawn sword in a country known only in legend was probably a very different person to an ordinary Irishman on College Green. It would be wise to let him lead the conversation.

"You're my prisoner," he said. "Will you give me your word not to attempt to escape?"

"Certainly."

He said something to his companions, who did not seem too pleased at such a tame ending to the affair.

"My name is Dennis O'Ryan—Captain Dennis O'Ryan," he said, motioning me to follow him.

"A few moments ago I had a comrade, Captain O'Ryan. As we came down from the mountains he lost control of himself, and was carried away yonder. I should like to look for him."

"You'll see him in the morning, if your eyesight is good. He won't move. Was he a friend?"

"Yes, a new acquaintance, but danger made us friends."

"Well, Mr.——"

"Verrall," I said.

"Well, Mr. Verrall, he's just a corpse now, and not a good specimen of a corpse, either. You will understand why to-morrow."

We went through a narrow cutting in the solid rock, the torches casting weird and fantastic shadows about us, and presently came to a natural cavern, high-pitched and of considerable size. A fire was burning in the centre, the smoke, after thickening the atmosphere, finding its way out through a cleft in the roof, and an iron pot was on the fire, a strong, meaty smell coming from it, which, being hungry, I did not find unpleasant. There was a spring trickling at one end of the cavern, and I bathed my arms and legs, which were very painful, and bleeding in places. My clothes, too, were torn, but not so much as might have been expected. The cloth was stout,

and my tailor in Sackville Street had hardly exaggerated when he declared that it would stand anything.

The ground of the cave was of loose soil, and my companions threw themselves down round the fire. O’Ryan motioned me to do the same. It was the most primitive meal I had ever assisted at, but I have rarely enjoyed one so much.

They were a wild-looking crew, not excepting Captain O’Ryan. They were powerful men, big-limbed, with shaggy dark hair and moustaches, not ill-looking, and rather picturesque than otherwise. They wore somewhat tight nether garments, and a rough, easy-fitting leather shirt, reaching nearly to the knees, but cut up at the thighs to give perfect freedom to the legs. Over this they wore a coat of mail, a compromise between plate and chain armour, and long boots of stiff hide, into the heels of which was fixed a spike about half an inch long. A low steel helmet fitting close on to the head completed their attire. For arms, each man carried a long serviceable-looking sword, which hung from a broad belt fastened loosely round the waist; and one or two of them had, besides, a short dagger, which just now they turned to a domestic use, cutting their meat with it. Except that his armour was brighter, and that he had a short feather at the side of his helmet, Captain O’Ryan did not differ from his comrades.

During the meal, I was considerably surprised to find that I could understand my companions’ conversation. O’Ryan, when speaking to me, spoke in English—or rather Irish—with a brogue, especially when he got excited, which I shall make no

attempt to reproduce in these pages. No trick of alphabetical arrangement could do it justice. When talking to his men he spoke in their language, which was the most curious conglomeration I have ever heard. It was apparently made up of several tongues, with a general groundwork of Norman-French. English, German and Italian were represented, and although there were words here and there which I could attach no meaning to, being a good linguist I could understand most of what was said; and if at first I was not so easily understood, I soon managed to talk pretty freely. There was, besides, a certain Oriental floweriness of expression which lent considerable dignity to this tongue, the origin of which I could not account for.

The meal ended, and washed down with wine which was of an exceedingly generous character, making me think of poor Mustapha, O'Ryan kicked the fire into a blaze.

"The history of your strange coming amongst us should be interesting," he said.

I told him the simple truth, which I must confess sounded very much like a magnificent lie. O'Ryan looked surprised, and his companions whispered amongst themselves when I had finished. They were evidently very interested in the story.

"I'll take my oath I didn't come that way," the Captain said.

"Which way, then?" I asked.

"I'd like to know. We certainly started up a mountain path, but before we had gone far they blindfolded us, and then we went down, where, I can't say, but it was somewhere near to roaring water."

"And how long have you been here?"

"I don't know. Time is not of much consequence in this country."

"What did you come for?"

"Money," was his laconic answer.

I smiled.

"What troubles me is if the money should fail and I can't get out of the place. It's poor sport walking Dublin penniless, I know, because I've tried it; but it would be the devil's own amusement here."

"There must be a way out," I said.

"There ought to be since you found a way in. We'll talk of it to-morrow. Rest now, for we start early."

I was not sorry to lie back upon the soft ground, my feet stretched out to the fire. My companions moved about for some time, after a sentry had been placed at the mouth of the cave. The neighing of a horse was the last sound I was conscious of, as I fell into a troubled sleep. All night long I was sliding downwards, now swiftly, making no effort to stop myself, now slowly, doing all in my power to arrest my progress. Always there was a straight black line before me, and over and over again something bounded past me to shoot out into space, a man—Mustapha, and then I cried out. I think I actually must have done so.

It was early morning when O'Ryan woke me.

"Come and look for your friend," he said.

I felt refreshed, but terribly stiff and bruised.

Sunlight was upon the mountain-tops, the shadows of light, fleecy clouds crossing them swiftly. Before the cavern ran a broad, hard road, rough and snow-caked, descending somewhat sharply to the right,

ascending gradually to the left, and directly opposite was the way I had come last night. I stood looking at it in amazement. A glacier stretched up to the mountains opposite, a portion of it ending at the roadway against which the winds had piled loose snow, luckily for me, but part of it had cracked and sunk, turning to run beside the road for a few yards, and then ending abruptly in what last night had appeared to me as a black line. Here the glacier was broken off, its support, a straight wall of rock, going down sheer for at least five hundred feet. At the base roared a torrent, which burst from the rock and lashed itself into foam over its rocky bed. The roadway formed the top of the huge perpendicular bank of the river, descending finally, it appeared, to the river's level, and the other bank was the gentler, though still precipitous slopes of the opposite mountains. It was a wild piece of scenery.

"If your comrade wasn't dead before he went over that, he was dead before he got to the bottom of it," said O'Ryan.

I could not with certainty distinguish the mountain ledge we had traversed yesterday, but at the head of the glacier I thought I could localize the spot where Mustapha and I had fallen. Masses of rock were scattered there, caught and embedded in the ice, which I must miraculously have missed, and which Mustapha must have struck upon. Perhaps only half-stunned at first, he had endeavored to prevent himself from slipping, had held on, or been caught for a moment. It was the only way I could account for the fact that I was before him in the descent. Had he not rolled past me, I should doubtless have

been drawn to the left, and should have seen that straight black line too late.

I looked down at the water, tumbling amongst the rocks, and saw a little black mass lying there, motionless, save for the motion the swirling water gave it. It was impossible to say what it was, but I think it must have been Mustapha, for two spots suddenly rose from it, growing larger as they mounted towards us with heavy flight.

"Vultures!" said my companion.

Poor Mustapha! He had expected so much of to-morrow. God rest his soul! He had indeed found a new country.

It was still early when we started upon our journey. One of the men was left behind, his horse being required for me, Captain O'Ryan promising to send for him as soon as possible. The horses were protected with a stiff leather cloth, upon which the saddle was placed, and with a jingle of harness which sounded musical enough in the still morning air, we set off. Two men were sent on in front, and told to keep a sharp look-out; the others fell to the rear, and O'Ryan and I rode alone.

"What am I to expect at the end of this journey?" I asked presently.

"Faith, that's more than I can tell. It's every man for himself here, and you'll find your life pretty much what you make it."

"That sounds promising."

"Oh, there's plenty of promise—it's some of the fulfilment I'm waiting for. It's all very well to live back in the middle ages and feel like the hero of a boy's story-book, but it wants paying for."

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"Then the legend is true, or partly true?" I said.

"I don't know anything about the legend, or how these people came here. Anyway, here they are, and engaged in as pretty a piece of war as poor old Ireland has ever suffered from. There are two factions in the country, the King's party and the rebels, who are headed by a relation of his—Princess Daria."

"Is the lady beautiful?"

"They say so."

"And you ungallantly fight against her!"

"There's no money in fighting for her, my boy, and beauty without money is of no use to me. Those who fight for the Princess fight chiefly for love of her, which is all very well in its way, but not attractive to the adventurer who hopes some day to go home and enjoy himself. The King, on the other hand, pays his soldiers, and not having enough men in the country to fight his cause, he has got in a few foreigners to help them. I'm one of the foreigners. We have all been brought in secretly, and not a man jack of us knows his way out."

"Does the King pay well?"

"I think he would if he could; but his lack of the necessary troubles me," O'Ryan answered.

"Then how does he manage?"

"Much as they do at home—makes promises and pays for the accommodations. That's not a new trick. It was an old-fashioned one in the days of ancient Babylon. The King, as a matter of fact, expects to find a treasure. We were looking for signs of it when you came. I expect the treasure is where the legendary part of the story comes in."

"You found nothing of it?"

"Not a cent. Still, my undertaking the mission means promotion when I return."

"And with a prisoner, too."

"I would sooner have had a bit of the treasure to take back," he answered bluntly. "I don't deny that I shall try and make something for myself out of bringing you back."

"How will you explain my coming?" I asked.

It was well that I should know how to speak best for myself. To look after number one seemed to be the creed of the country.

"I shall tell the truth," O'Ryan said. "There is no lie to equal it. I'm glad you're a big, healthy-looking fellow. We don't take much notice of weaklings. As long as a man has a mighty arm, the size of his brain doesn't matter."

The mountains on either side of us narrowed as we went on, until we were presently passing through a defile that a few resolute men could have held against an army. I noticed that O'Ryan quickened his pace, and became silent for a time.

"Are you not a small party to travel in such perilous times?" I asked.

"Yes, but we did not want to attract attention. We'll stop here for a little."

We had been gradually descending for a long time past, and it was much warmer. A spring trickled from the mountain, and fell into a natural basin by the roadside, and we watered our horses. O'Ryan handed me his flask, which I did full justice to. Our halt was of short duration, and we were soon jingling on again.

The defile came to an end suddenly, and we came

out on to a broad road which swept round the slopes of the lower hills. An exclamation of astonishment and admiration burst from my lips. Away from the road, the hills, green-clad and wooded, undulated to level country, which stretched away for miles. Green pastures, arable land, clusters of rough stone dwellings here and there, a river glinting in the sunlight, and woody hollows, made as fair a landscape as one could wish to see. Cattle were feeding below us, and I saw some women moving about the dwellings at the foot of the hill.

"Your first real glimpse of Druessenland," said O'Ryan.

"Is that how you call the country?"

"I didn't christen it, but that's the name of it."

"It is very beautiful," I said, and doesn't look as if it were the seat of war."

"Things have been rather quiet lately, probably because there's a storm brewing. You see those women? Women do most of the work just now because all the men are under arms on one side or the other."

"And are unprotected women safe in such times?"

"Well, I won't go quite so far as to say that, but there is a rough sort of gallantry amongst us that compares fairly well with civilized nations when war is the order of the day."

"The legend says the women are beautiful."

"And, by Saint Patrick, the legend's right so far. If I ever get back to Ireland, there'll be moments when I shall wish myself here again, though the finest pair of eyes in the old country were looking at me. The women are all right, and luckily for most

of us, cling to the man who can hold his own against other men."

"Is there no marriage?"

"Oh, yes, we get married after the law of the country, but it's not very binding even here, so I suppose most of us will pose as bachelors when we get away, if we ever do. We're rather advanced in some respects, you see, although we are behind the times in others. We don't go to law about trifles in Drussenland. There's no breach of promise and there's no divorce, and if two men quarrel they just go to a quiet spot, and hack away at each other until the affair is settled. The one who comes back takes possession of the lady or the money, or whatever they have been fighting about."

"Primitive," I said. "I judge, Captain, that you are comfortably settled?"

"Trust a son of the house of Michael O'Ryan, of County Kerry, for that. I've had to fight about her twice, and each time I've crawled home again. Possession is something—nine points of the law, as they say; but the tenth point is always in favor of the man who desires your property, and handles a sword as well or, perhaps, better than you do."

"Swords. Have you no firearms in this country?"

"There may be a stray revolver or two brought in by some of the foreigners, but they're not much use without ammunition, and that's not to be had in Drussenland."

At a turn of the road I saw again the snow-clad peak which I had seen so often yesterday, looking far grander now than it did from the mountains. It rose almost abruptly from the low hills. I mentioned

to my companion how I had been struck with it yesterday.

"It is called Khrym, which means the White Knight, and it is supposed to rule the destinies of the Drussenlanders," he said.

"They worship it?"

"Not exactly; but it is a symbol of everything that is good and great. The religion is as curious a jumble as the language. I wonder how far our advance guard is ahead? I thought we should have overtaken them by this time."

"Do you expect to be attacked?" I asked.

"No; but we don't want to be too far apart. We are in the rebel's part of the country."

He was evidently anxious, and we went on for a long time in silence. The road began to ascend again, and presently we got another and a wider view of the lower country. Far across the open plain I saw the dim outline of a city, at one side of which was a gigantic rock.

"Yonder is the capital," said O'Ryan.

"And the rock?"

"The great stronghold of the city—indeed, of the country, the fortress of Yadasara."

It rose from the plain abruptly, its frowning top jagged as though lightning had played angry sport with it. It looked square in shape, but I could not judge its height from this distance.

"It is a mighty stronghold," said O'Ryan, after a pause. "And I trust I may never find myself shut on the wrong side of its walls."

"Why?"

"It has a bad name for those who displease the King. Those who are carried to its gates seldom

return. It is the time of the middle ages here, Verrall, and they were barbarous times, you know. Death has a hundred ghastly realities in the fortress of Yadasara."

There was little swagger about this adventurer as he spoke. Fearless as he was about most things, the fortress had inspired him with awe. He shook up his horse, and we went on at a rapid trot, the men behind keeping close to us. Soon afterwards we entered a wood. O'Ryan reined in his horse and we proceeded slowly and silently.

"I wonder where those fellows are?" he said.

We were approaching the outskirts of the wood, and he had hardly spoken when there was a sharp clatter of horse's hoofs coming rapidly towards us, and a moment later our advance guard appeared. A strong company of the enemy was before us, not by chance, but apparently awaiting our advent.

"Were you seen?" asked O'Ryan.

The men did not think so.

There were only seven of us, and I was unarmed. It would be madness to go on, and O'Ryan evidently thought so, for, after a moment's thought, he turned his horse from the road into the wood.

"We must get away if we can," he said. "There is a chance of reaching the open country this way. Look out for the holes," he added, turning to me.

"I am sorry we haven't a spare sword. You must take your chance."

This was not very encouraging. My chance looked an exceedingly poor one. It was soon apparent that our scouts were mistaken, and that they had been seen. We had not gone fifty yards when a score of men, similarly accoutred to my companions, rushed

upon us. The struggle was short and sharp. I was unable to make any kind of resistance, and was dragged from my horse and my hands tied securely behind me. O'Ryan and his men fought desperately, and for a few minutes the clash of steel woke the echoes of the wood. But numbers told. O'Ryan was knocked out of his saddle, and was bound as I was, and three of his men were also taken prisoners. Six men lay dead, two of ours and four of the enemy, bearing terrible witness to the fact that the fight had been no child's play. It was my first experience of mediæval warfare, but it was not destined to be my last.

"With luck we may get to heaven," O'Ryan whispered to me, "but I don't think we'll ever get to Yadasara. Prisoners of war get badly handled. We'd be better off lying with those poor devils yonder."

The order was given to mount. Our captors helped us into our saddles, and, placing us in the centre of the company, we started off at a quick pace. There was some rough jesting at our expense as we jingled on, and my appearance caused a good deal of surprise. I was as strange to them as they were to me.

Mustapha was right. I had indeed found adventure; but the cords cut my wrists and I thought of Brâyle with a sigh.

CHAPTER IV**THE LONG-EXPECTED KNIGHT.**

SURROUNDED on every side by mountains, twilight is of short duration in Drussenland. It was dark long before we came to our journey's end, and, in spite of O'Ryan's gloomy forebodings, I was not sorry to reach the rebel head-quarters.

The rebel camp, which was set round a good-sized town, called Mëera I learnt later, lay between two spurs of the hills, and we came upon it suddenly. There was no attempt to conceal the position, for camp fires dotted the valley. We were challenged by more than one sentry, and when we reached the outer lines, and it became known that the expedition had been successful, we were greeted with cheers as we went through the lines into the town. Inside the walls—the town appeared to be strongly fortified—the company separated, O'Ryan and I going with one party, and our companions with the other. What became of them that night I do not know. O'Ryan and I were taken into a barrack-yard full of armed men, and, after our hands had been untied, were locked in a dungeon. We were in absolute darkness, and for some moments stood quite still, and were silent. Then O'Ryan growled out a long string of oaths, which must have given him considerable trou-

ble to collect, and ended by consigning himself to perdition for leaving his flask in his saddle-bag.

"Things might be worse," I observed.

"Worse?"

"We might be dead."

"That wouldn't be worse."

"Let to-morrow look out for itself. This place smells dry, at any rate, and I'm going to get a night's rest, if it's the last I ever have."

O'Ryan growled out something about ignorance and bliss, and then started cursing again. I groped round the dungeon, and found a piece of sacking in a corner. This I shook well, and then lay down upon it. I was worn out, which was hardly wonderful, seeing what I had accomplished in less than forty-eight hours. I had stepped from modern civilization back into the middle ages, and was a prisoner of war, surrounded by men in armor.

A flood of daylight, pouring into the darkness through the open doorway, awoke me, and almost blinded me too. I rose to my feet, but the two soldiers who entered had not come for me. They shook O'Ryan, who, after a few sleepy grunts, stood up, very wide awake indeed.

"Wanted so soon?" he said.

One of the soldiers answered in the affirmative.

"Good, far better than long waiting," he said, and he shook hands with me.

The next moment he was gone; the door closed, and was locked again, and I was alone. A faint light struggled into the dungeon from a grating high up in the masonry, and I could hear the regular pacing of a sentry before my door. Perhaps an hour elapsed before the door opened again. A soldier entered,

and placed on the floor some food and a flagon of wine. I thanked him, and he saluted me. I was exceedingly puzzled to know why I received such respect. Had I performed great feats of daring yesterday, I should have thought his salute a soldier's courtesy to daring—a recognition of a foeman worthy of his steel, but this certainly was not the reason. He waited until I had eaten some of the food and drunk the wine, with what relish I leave to the imagination, and then requested me to follow him. Outside, a small guard received me, and I was taken across the barrack-yard, which was full of life and business, to a building on the opposite side. In the first place I entered, there was a huge stone trough filled with water, where I was allowed to make my ablutions, and then, feeling a new man, I was marched into a guard-room. Soldiers, evidently off duty, were lounging about in it, and they all regarded me with immense interest. It was not to be wondered at seeing how much I differed from them, not only in dress, but in appearance. My fair hair and skin, my innocence of beard and moustache, marked me out as a foreigner, and no doubt the fact that I had been found with their enemy and unarmed made them curious. No restraint was put upon me, and I paced up and down the room, endeavoring to look as big and courageous as possible. O'Ryan had said that a man was judged by his strength in Drussenland, so I threw out my chest, and made the most of my inches. I could not help noticing that the men about me were better appointed than those O'Ryan commanded. Their armor was better cared for, and there was less of the buccaneering savage about them.

It must have been about noon when a body of warriors, more imposing than any I had yet seen, marched into the yard. They looked like picked men. Their armor glistened in the sunlight, their helmets were decorated with plumes, and each man carried a long lance sloped over the shoulder, which was grounded with excellent precision as, at the word of command, they halted before the guard-room.

The officer came to me.

"The Princess holds council, and I am commanded to bring you before her," he said.

I inclined my head.

My journey to the council hall was through the streets, and many people, chiefly women and old men, had gathered to see me pass. We turned into a courtyard, surrounded on three sides by massive stone buildings, and marching straight across, halted for a moment before gates which opened into a great hall. Soldiers, similar to those who had escorted me, were upon the steps and about the entrance. I passed through the gates, a small detachment of soldiers following me, and entered the hall. It looked narrow, considering its great height and length, and was of massive proportions. From a dozen low, square pillars on either side of the central portion sprang high, rounded arches, reaching nearly to the roof, and in the aisles on either side, which were much lower than the central portion, were narrow, oblong windows and many small doors, evidently communicating with other parts of the building. At each end of the building was a huge round window, but the lighting was insufficient, and the place was gloomy. The floor was of stone flags, worn a good deal, and, indeed, the whole edifice looked old. I

know little of architecture, but although the style was common in large buildings in Drussenland, I have seen nothing like it elsewhere. The lower end of the hall was filled with soldiers, and at the upper end was a platform, raised some four or five feet from the ground. Seated in the centre was a woman, surrounded by knights who were clad in steel—a goodly sight to look upon if strange to such eyes as mine. Just below the platform on either side stood a dozen men in loose garments reaching from shoulder to heel, tied at the waist with a white sash, the ends of which fell to the ground. Each one wore a white skull cap. They were all elderly men, and their hair and beards had been allowed to grow at will. One, evidently the chief of them, was upon the platform standing close to the Princess, and I judged that he was of high account amongst her councillors. His robe was of richer material, and his girdle which he wore from the right shoulder to the left hip was of silver. His cap was also bound with silver. He was a magnificent man, his thick white beard reaching below his waist, and seemed to realize the idea one has of the patriarch Moses. The knights, as I have said, were clad in steel, raised devices upon their breasts, and on each side of the platform was a crowd of pages bearing the shields and helmets of their masters. Each one there looked a man and a warrior; but the most brilliant amongst them stood at the Princess's right hand. On his armor was a gold device, and over his coat of mail a white cloak was thrown, fastened at the shoulder. His presence was commanding, but cruelty was in every line of his face. It did not

require the skill of a physiognomist to know that he would be an ugly enemy.

To say that the Princess was the most beautiful woman my eyes had ever rested upon is hardly to describe her. Men have said such things since the time when women were few upon the earth, have so spoken of women who have never been famous for beauty, of women who, although appealing to single individuals, have passed with scant recognition from even the little world they have moved in. The statement is therefore a jargon conveying little meaning. The whole of Princess Daria's world allowed that she was the most beautiful of women—and the women of Drussenland are beautiful; her warriors, from the highest knight to the humblest soldier, worshipped her, and had sworn obedience to him who should win her for himself. My first impression was that she was fit to rule those who bowed before her. She looked queenly and their mistress. Her figure was commanding, tall, and well-rounded. Her skin was fair almost to whiteness, save for a rich flush in her cheeks. Her eyes were dark, capable of flashing angrily; but I have known them to melt into tenderness. Her voice was clear and musical. Her decisions were never hasty, but from her judgment there was no appeal. She was dressed in a loose white robe of rare texture, which fell straight from her shoulders, leaving her right arm, which had a bracelet of gold upon it above the elbow, bare. Her raven hair was gathered on to the top of her head, and bound with a golden circle. Seated in her chair of state, as I first saw her, she looked a Princess; she looked what she was, the idol of her people, and she looked more—a woman a man could love.

Every eye was turned towards me as I advanced up the hall. Certainly never before had I been such a centre of attraction. I saw O’Ryan standing at the foot of the platform between two soldiers; but as I approached he eluded their vigilance, and, rushing towards me, fell on his knee and kissed my hand, whispering as he did so—

“Admit everything. It’s our only chance.”

Evidently I had to play a part of some sort. I wondered what it was. There was silence for some moments as I stood at the foot of the platform. The Princess leaned forward in her seat to study me closely, and I tried to look unconscious of the sensation I caused.

He in the white robe and the silver girdle was the first to speak.

“Is it true what this man has told concerning you?” he said, pointing to O’Ryan.

I took him to be a chief amongst the priests—rightly, as it chanced—and I remembered that a floweriness of expression was one of the peculiarities of the language.

“Sometimes men lie. What has he told concerning me?” I said.

“That suddenly, while he watched in the night, you came from the mountains quickly by a path unknown, which no man has traveled.”

“It is true.”

O’Ryan had evidently been telling them some fairy tale of my sudden and mysterious appearance, trusting that native superstition would help us.

“Know you aught of us in Drussenland?”

“I know that war sings death among the hills.”

“Naught else?”

"I know that Khrym looks down, and is sorrowful, hiding his head with a cloud."

I judged that, as Khrym represented all that was good and right, I could not go far wrong by mentioning the mountain. A murmur like the distant roll of thunder went through the hall. I had made a lucky answer.

"The great Khrym shall be appeased to-morrow," he said. "Is it from Khrym you have come?"

He asked the question slowly.

"I have said that I came from the mountains. Has any man traversed the path I have traversed?"

I thought this was a safe observation.

"And you have come to help us?"

"To all good."

I was not going to compromise myself if I could help it. Who was I supposed to be? Was I some Heaven-sent warrior come to lead them to an assault upon Yadasara? Excitement was upon every face, but my answer was apparently not full enough, for after a pause, my interlocutor said—

"Tell us your mission that we may know you."

I looked at O'Ryan, and he bowed low. There was no help for it; I must go on.

"From the mountains have I come to help you against your enemies. Be strong, and your Princess shall sit upon the throne in Yadasara. Be faithful, be patient, and that which has been hidden for ages from your eyes shall once more sparkle in the sunlight in Drussenland."

My allusion to the treasure had an electrical effect upon my audience. The Princess rose to her feet, and the steel rang mightily as every sword leapt from

its scabbard. The priests bowed low, and shout after shout made the massive walls echo again.

Only one man seemed unmoved at my statement—he who stood at the right hand of the Princess.

“Has the priest sure proof that the Knight so long expected has come?”

“The priests shall study before they speak certainly, Count Vasca.”

It was evident that no love was lost between these two men.

“Remember,” said the Count, irritated at the priest’s quiet answer, and pointing to O’Ryan, “on the word of a foreign dog we are trusting.”

“Nay, Count, on the word of the knight himself.”

It was the Princess who spoke. It was the first time I had heard her speak, and her voice thrilled me.

“The Princess has judged,” answered the Count. “What, then, shall be done to this foreign dog, who, knowing that this was the promised knight, sought to carry him to our enemies in Yadasara?”

A growl of hatred followed these words, and I saw that it was likely to go hard with O’Ryan.

“Stay!” I cried, raising my arm for silence. “Those who fight in a cause, faithful to that cause, are worthy of honor. These foreign dogs, valiant though they be, fight often in ignorance.”

“To that man owes many a knight his overthrow,” said the Count.

“If he has been mighty in a wrong cause, more mighty shall he be in a right one. He has told the truth of me, and is, therefore, sacred to me and to my cause.”

“Then I have not understood our laws,” said

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Count Vasca, in a voice which rang clear and loud through the hall. "Since the days when the mountains shut in our land, no foreign dog has come to us, who are true Drussenlanders. Our enemies have called them in to slay us; but we who are true people hate them, even with a more deadly hatred than those, who, born in the land, bear arms against us in the pay of him who calls himself the King. Have not the priests, speaking as with the mouth of Khrym himself, commanded us to crush them as we would reptiles under our feet? Have the priests given us false counsel, or does this knight o'erstep his mission? Would Khrym speak in one way to the priests, and after another manner to his messenger? Is it not strange, Princess, that two commands concerning our enemies are given us?"

No doubt this was a powerful argument. Logically, there was no answering it. The Princess looked at the priest, and the priest looked at me.

"Count Vasca speaks most truly," I said. "But man's judgment is bound by the things of to-day, and of the morrow he knows naught. Where man sees only an enemy to-day, Khrym may recognize one who shall to-morrow be his messenger. This foreign dog has been so marked out. Had it not been given to him to know me, might he not have attacked me instead of welcoming me? If in his ignorance he wished to take me to those whom he served, was he not faithfully fulfilling his duty as he understood it? The priests have well understood, and have rightly spoken the law, but of this man they have not spoken."

"He is a foreign dog; it is enough," said the Count, but no sound of approbation followed.

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I had the advantage, and I seized it.

"I came from the mountains, and to the mountains I can return."

"The priests have not yet consulted," he said.

"Let them beware how they do so," I answered. "In their study lies the fate of Drussenland. This man is my armor-bearer, my page, and squire. Speak, Princess. Judge betwixt Count Vasca and me. As your knight, I claim this man, sacred to me and to my cause."

"Princess——"

"Pardon, Count," she said, interrupting him. "Sir Knight, the man is yours."

From that moment Count Vasca was my bitter enemy, but I could see that the priest was pleased. How I stood with the other knights I could not tell.

"Study to-night," said the Princess, turning to the priests. "To-morrow, after sunset, shall we hold audience, and you shall declare if this is he so long by you expected. Count, see this knight and his servant well-attended, then come to me. I have a word for you in private."

For one moment the Princess looked at me keenly, and then turned. A door at the back of the platform was thrown open, and, followed by a guard of soldiers, she disappeared. Immediately the hall began to empty. The priests slowly left by a side door, and the knights, in knots of two and three, followed by their pages, passed down to the gates by which I had entered.

Count Vasca came to me.

"I am commanded to see you fittingly entertained," he said, and he led the way through one of the side doors, O'Ryan and I following, a small

guard behind us, whether to honor us or to see that we did not escape, I do not know.

We passed down several long corridors, and then mounted a flight of stairs.

"Rest here until to-morrow," said the Count, ushering us into a spacious apartment. "I will see that you are served."

In a short time food was brought us, and wine in flagons.

"I did not expect to eat again," said O'Ryan.

"No you expected to be in heaven, from whence it appears I have come. Who am I?"

"Faith, Mr. Verrall, it's a bold man ye are to stand up to Vasca like that, and by Saint Patrick you've promised them something."

"What else could I do?"

"Nothing. I felt cold steel within me when the Count began to talk. Thanks, Verrall, for saving me from that meal and bringing me to this. Eat, my worthy master. It's courage and a strong arm ye'll want to seat the Princess on the throne in Yadasara."

CHAPTER V**THE APPEASING OF KHYRM**

I COULD get nothing out of O’Ryan until he had done full justice to the food and wine.

“This is much better than sudden death,” he said, setting down his empty flagon with an intense sigh of satisfaction.

“Are you prepared to talk now?” I asked.

“Yes, until I fall asleep.”

“Then tell me who I am supposed to be?”

“A saint.”

“I don’t feel like one.”

“You played that part to perfection.”

“I feel more like a considerable sized liar.”

O’Ryan laughed.

“It was the only way out of it. Half measures were no good. How we’re going to act up to promise, I don’t know. You may possibly get the Princess to the capital, but how you’re going to find a treasure which doesn’t exist, beats me.”

“I told them to be patient,” I said.

“You did; but I don’t think patience is of much use to them.”

“Count Vasca didn’t believe a word I said.”

“No, still he is not too well loved. The priests hate him because he does not love the priests, and many of the knights hate him because they believe the Princess thinks too much of him.”

"Loves him, do you mean?"

"Yes. He is a kinsman of hers, and wishes to marry her. Most of the knights swallowed your story, and the Princess——"

"What of her?"

"Well, she may believe it or she may not; but she's a woman, and you're a big, good-looking man. If the priests say you are the Knight expected, I don't think she'll raise any objection."

"She did not appear to me a woman likely to be easily fooled."

"Still a woman, Verrall. Much can be done with a woman if she is carefully handled."

"Upon my word, she made me almost ashamed of myself."

"Why?"

"My dear fellow, I have some sort of conscience."

"I'm sorry to hear it," said O'Ryan bluntly. "If you let conscience take the reins in this business, it's dead men we'll both be. What's the good of making a martyr of yourself? If they choose to think Khrym sent you, let them. They feel better for thinking so, and you live—an arrangement which suits everybody."

"Let me know just where I am, O'Ryan," I said, after a pause. "What tale did you tell of me?"

"I began telling the truth, and when I saw how interested they were, I varnished it a little. The fact is, I had got half-way through with the story before I remembered that the legend about the treasure says that a great Knight shall come to Drussenland and find it. The priests' questions first put it into my head. Your appearance had already impressed the soldiers, so I just cut in and swore that you were

the Knight everybody was expecting. It was a pretty bold move, seeing I had not talked it over with you, but it was a good one—witness our being here.”

“If the people believe this legend so implicitly, how was it you were treasure-hunting when I first came upon you?”

“Easily explained,” said O’Ryan. “The King in Yadasara is not much under priestly influence. He likes having his own way, and although he firmly believes that the treasure exists, he thinks he can find it without any supernatural aid, and if it does exist, I dare say he is quite right.”

“Probably.”

“Besides, he is surrounded by a good many nineteenth century adventurers, who care about as much for religion as a cow does for roast partridge. To put it shortly, the superstitious part of the people are mostly here with the Princess.”

“But what is the religion of Drussenland?”

“I’m not much at religion myself, Verrall,” he said, “although at home in County Kerry they’re all good Catholics, and it’s a Catholic I should be if I’d got the impudence to call myself anything. You see, that’s where my conscience steps in. They are not heathens in this country, but everything has a symbol. You have seen how the mountain Khrym stands like a sentinel over the land. It is the most prominent feature, and when thinking of the author of his being and ruler of his destiny, every true Drussenlander thinks of Khrym, therefore Khrym has come to mean God, and although they do not worship the mountain, they believe that the appearance of the mountain reflects the pleasure or displeasure of the Almighty.”

"The religion seems to have slipped back to something very like heathenism," I said.

"It's done the same in the old country in times past, Verrall, when they took to burning each other for little differences of opinion."

"Do all the people believe this symbolical jumble?"

"I think so—that is, all who are for the Princess. I don't suppose the priests believe all they teach, but it suits them to keep up the superstition; and this war has become a kind of religious one."

"Have they no priests in Yadasara?" I asked.

"Plenty; and very wisely for themselves, they teach what pleases the King. That kind of thing, too, has been done in the old country."

"So I am the expected Knight sent from Khrym."

"You told them so."

"How the deceit is to be kept up, I don't know."

"First of all, lock up that conscience of yours for a bit, and play the game to the end."

"There seems nothing else to be done."

"Spoken like a man. Once let each of us get a sword by his side, and a horse between his legs, we can talk of the future with more confidence. It's poor sport arranging for to-morrow's picnic when to-day holds a very good chance of a violent death."

"Do you know what my name is supposed to be?"

"I think you's nameless at present. It is of little consequence. If necessary, I'd just be too great a personage altogether to have a name, and let them dub you what they will. Then, Sir Knight, whatever your name is, I am your humble squire."

I laughed. The situation was ludicrous, but at the same time, it was exceedingly dangerous. If the people believed in me, a false move would madden

them. The statement that I had a conscience was in no way a figure of speech, and it troubled me greatly at times during my early days in Drussenland. It was not only that I had to tell lies, but I was obliged to act them. I say obliged advisedly, and one thing is quite certain: no man will be able to sit in judgment upon me, for surely no man has ever been in a similar position.

Except when food was brought in we were left in peace for the remainder of the day, and that night I slept soundly, not a dream disturbing me.

The next morning was clear and sunny. Our quarters overlooked a large square, which appeared to be the centre of the town, and although it was early when I awoke, the business of the day was commenced. O'Ryan was still sleeping, and I did not wake him. Men and women were hurrying to and fro across the square, some staying to gossip for a few moments with their neighbors, talking eagerly, and I could not help thinking that their conversation was of me. Looking across the town I could see a large portion of the camp, where all was movement and bustle, armor and arms glistening in the sun, and the dull rumble of many voices ascended to my ears. Beyond the camp, across the spur of the lower hills, I could see the summit of Khrym standing out white against the blue sky. No cloud hung about the peak—a good omen it would seem, for I saw more than one person in the square below point to the mountain and appear satisfied.

Perhaps, after all, it was no wonder that the mountain, so lofty, so white, so silent, standing age after age like a sentinel over this isolated country,

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should have entered into this people's religion. Who of us has not felt a reverential awe as he stood looking up to the great bare mountain-peaks, now glinting white in the sunlight, now capped with rolling clouds; to the heights where only the eagle can find a resting-place, and where silence reigns? It is no great step from such a feeling to worship. We forget this sometimes as we struggle through the maze of ancient legend and allegory.

The sound of trumpets broke my reverie. Into the square marched a troop of warriors, with lances sloped and with rhythmical tread, and in the midst of them, attended by a dozen knights, was Princess Daria. She rode as a man, clothed in a light coat of mail, a low steel helmet upon her head, from underneath which strayed a lock or two of her hair. Her limbs were cased in steel, and her horse was in armor. No wonder her soldiers worshipped her! Her presence would have inspired the veriest coward with courage. The guard halted on either side, and she crossed the square and passed into the building by an entrance immediately below our quarters.

Did she look up once? I thought so, but it may have been that my desire fired my imagination. It was good to be the expected Knight, good to swear allegiance to such a woman as this.

"A brave show, Sir Knight."

I had not heard O'Ryan stirring, and he startled me.

"A warlike young woman," he went on. "That cavalcade going along Whitehall would make London think a little."

I laughed.

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"Very warlike, but still a woman. Don't forget that."

"Am I likely to forget it?"

"Caught already, eh? Well, the women in this country take a lot of beating. I'm wondering how my wife in the capital yonder is getting on. If I ever get back I expect I'll have to do some more hacking for her. When I don't turn up she'll say, 'Poor Dennis, he's dead,' and then——"

"Well?" I said, as he paused.

"Then she'll marry some one else."

"Are there no widows, then?"

"A few old ones. The young are philosophical. Mike may be a better man than Pat, but Pat living is worth any number of dead Mikes."

"Cheer up, O'Ryan," I said. "You must win her back if necessary."

"It's certain to be necessary," he answered, giving his arm a swing as though he held a sword in his hand. "So you're caught, too. You'll have to fight first, Verrall. There's no love without fighting in Drussenland. Get the Princess crowned in Yadasara, and, faith, you may be King Consort."

"Don't talk rot."

"Everything is possible here, except common sense," he answered, as the door opened and our breakfast came in.

We lounged at the windows all the morning watching the life below us, and it was evident that the day was not an ordinary one in the town. There was a disposition to loiter, and as the day advanced, crowds began to gather. Business was neglected, and when soldiers were marched into the square from the camp, it was evident that something unusual was going to

happen. The centre of the square was kept clear, and here about noon three sets of double stakes were fixed firmly in the ground.

"What is going to happen?" I said, turning to O'Ryan.

"I'm not a prophet," he answered.

Presently a single trumpet sounded, and as its last note echoed among the hills, a great shout burst into the air, a shout that woke the hills to voice again. A silence followed, and I could hear faintly a slow, mournful, although not unmusical, chant coming from some part of the building below us.

"Some religious ceremony," I said.

O'Ryan nodded.

"The beginning of the priests' study, perhaps."

O'Ryan nodded again. His arms were folded, and he was looking very intently down into the square.

There was the clatter of horses' hoofs, and a troop of knights, headed by Count Vasca, appeared. I looked amongst them to find the Princess, but she was not there. There was a savage satisfaction in the Count's face as he glanced up at our windows. We both drew back.

"That man will be our greatest enemy," said O'Ryan. "Better that he should not see us watching."

"His looks augur us no good," I answered. "It may be that the priests have decided against me."

"No. There is no audience until after sunset. You heard the command yesterday."

"The Count may know beforehand."

"I don't think the old priest would make a confidant of him. In their enmity lies our safety."

"Then what does all this parade mean?"

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"Whatever it means, we must be silent," said O'Ryan. "Indeed, is there any need for us to watch?"

"Why not?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Remember, Verrall—absolute silence."

That O'Ryan feared something, and would not speak of it, annoyed me.

"I'm not a child to shout and clap my hands at a show," I said irritably.

"But you may be man enough to cry out at this show. That is what I am afraid of, and if you do, you'll be playing into the hands of that blackguardly Count yonder."

The doings in the square prevented me from asking further questions.

A company of soldiers marched out from the building below us, having in their midst three men, naked almost, with their arms bound tightly behind them. They were followed by priests walking two and two.

"Three prisoners?"

I looked at O'Ryan as I spoke. He nodded, watching me closely.

Each prisoner was bound between two stakes, his arms and legs outstretched. Before each man stood a soldier, a drawn sword in his hand, and behind stood the priests. The silence was intense, I could hear my own heart beat.

"Three prisoners! Your followers!" I whispered.

Again O'Ryan nodded, not taking his eyes from me.

Suddenly I remembered the words of the priest that to-morrow Khrym should be appeased. This

was what he meant. Great Heavens! it was too horrible!

I opened my mouth to speak, and O'Ryan's heavy hand was on my arm.

A flourish of trumpets rang out, three swords like lightning strokes flashed in the sunlight, three bodies quivered for a moment, and then hung motionless upon the stakes.

A triumphant shout came from the square, as with a cry I sprang to the window. My cry was smothered in a moment. With a strength which I should hardly have given him credit for, O'Ryan clasped his hands over my mouth and threw me back sharply into the room.

"Fool! Do you want five corpses hanging there instead of three?"

CHAPTER VI**THE VIGIL**

SHOUT after shout filled the air. The priests again chanted solemnly, and there was tramping of feet, and the clash of steel as the crowd dispersed, and the soldier's returned to camp.

My blood was boiling. Such cold-blooded murder was appalling, sickening, and I longed for freedom to dash into the midst of those fiends and avenge the victims.

O'Ryan did not give me time to be angry.

"You'll know that I was right when you're able to think quietly," he said. "You must forget that you have lived in the nineteenth century. After all, it was a quick death, merciful to many deaths I have heard of."

"Is there no way out of this infernal country?" I said. "Now, before it is too late?"

"I know only of the way you came into it."

"And when our lie is discovered, we shall be spitted like those poor devils, I suppose."

O'Ryan shook his head slowly.

"If they find us out, we'll get no such kind treatment as that. Let us play the part until we get swords and horses. I'd like to have the chance of dying fighting."

"We'll have that chance, O'Ryan," I said savagely. "I'll play the part. Have no fear of that. My arm tingles to wield a sword against these blood-thirsty scoundrels."

"Steadily, Sir Knight. Yonder in Yadasara are your enemies. You'll find even worse blackguards there."

"I dare swear that Count Vasca revelled in this murderous exhibition," I said after a pause.

"Very likely."

"And the Princess?" I said questioningly.

The thought that such a woman could be capable of such ferocity was maddening. Some day I might possibly teach the Count a lesson, but how teach a lesson to a woman?

"She must rule according to her people's law," said O'Ryan.

"She must have known of it," I went on speaking rather to myself than to my companion. "Such a thing could not be possible without her knowing it. What deviltry can lie at the heart of a beautiful woman!"

"Ay, from Adam's time even until now," said O'Ryan.

"I had hoped great things of Princess Daria."

"I'd go on hoping, Verrall. If these priests decide in your favor, you'll have a voice in the law-making."

"True. Good may come out of this masquerading."

"It won't pay to be too good," O'Ryan said. "The part won't admit of it."

"We shall see. I'll speak loudly of wonders if I cannot perform them."

"You must do both," answered O'Ryan. "It is

muscle first in this country. I should not be much surprised, however, if the Princess knew nothing of this morning's work."

"Why?"

"It has occurred to me that it may have been a little game of the Count's. He was very anxious to see if you were watching. He may have thought you would betray yourself."

"I certainly should have done so had it not been for you."

O'Ryan nodded.

"You would, and I don't blame you; but it is no use throwing our lives away."

I returned to the window.

In a very short space of time the square was cleared, the stakes and their ghastly burdens were removed, and an almost unnatural quietness fell over town and camp. O'Ryan, lying carelessly on a bench, nodded at intervals, the wine, of which he had drunk heavily, inducing sleep. I, too, had drunk a great deal, but far from making me heavy-eyed, it only made me restless and excited. I paced up and down the room, thoughts, hopes, and fears tumbling over one another in my brain in their endeavors to fix themselves in my mind. Now and then I paused at the window to look towards Khrym. My fate seemed linked to the mountain. The long afternoon limped wearily to the evening, and it was with a feeling of relief that I saw the snowcap of the mountain deepen into gold, the herald of sunset. After sunset was my fate to be settled, and the long waiting and uncertainty were terrible. When darkness came lights were brought—slow-burning torches, which were fixed in rings in the wall, and more food

and wine, which caused O'Ryan to say a good word for our captor's hospitality. I could not eat. I was too anxiously listening for steps approaching our prison.

They came at last long after sunset. I had been expecting them every moment for a long time past. There had been much coming and going in the square below us. Flaring torches passed in and out of the building, and something like the excitement of the morning seemed to have been renewed after dark. It was impossible to see what was going on, and O'Ryan began to pace up and down restlessly. More than once he paused at the window.

"I don't like all this commotion, Verrall," he said, stopping suddenly in front of me.

"You think it a bad sign?"

"I know no more than you do, but it's all well to be prepared."

"What can we do?"

"Little enough; but when they come, stop them before the room is full. Hold up your arm in a commanding manner, and ask their decision. Look as if you had the power to call thunder and lightning down upon them."

"And then?" I asked.

"If they have decided against you, we'll go for them. Seize a torch, dash it in their faces, get hold of a sword if possible; but anyway, fight like demons let loose—in fact, get killed this way rather than get tied up to die in the square there later on."

"Right," I said. "Hush! they are coming."

I took up my position close to one torch, and O'Ryan stood by another. The doors were thrown open, and the priests were on the threshold, armed

men and servants carrying lights behind them. I assumed as commanding an attitude as I could, and said in a loud voice—

“You have been long in coming. What has your study taught you?”

One priest, a chief among them, but not the one who had questioned me yesterday, stepped forward.

“Through the night and through the day have we studied, and we know that you are the true Knight.”

I bowed, and O’Ryan whispered, “Good business,” as he bent his knee before me. It sounded a strange solecism, and nearly upset my gravity.

“To-night is a vigil,” continued the priest. “To-morrow the most valorous in deeds shall buckle on your harness and your sword. See you be a faithful knight. Attend your master,” he added to O’Ryan.

Surrounded by soldiers and priests, we passed down several corridors, and then entered a small hall; in the centre of which was a huge bath, steps leading down into it. Two priests, with deft fingers, stripped off my clothes, and I watched every movement carefully, that I might make no egregious mistake. At a sign I passed down the steps into the water, and with a plunge came up the other end of the bath, where two more priests received me. I was dried, other clothes were put upon me, and I stood as a Drussenlander, but without harness.

Again we formed in procession, and as we left the hall the priests began to chant a weird melody. We went down a long wide corridor which was lined with soldiers, and at the end, descending a flight of steps, entered a chapel. O’Ryan was not allowed to follow

me. I went in with the priests alone, and the doors were closed.

The chapel, except that its architecture was that peculiar to Drussenland, and that there were no seats for the congregation, might have been in London. The building was dimly lighted, and upon an altar, standing upon a flight of steps and raised much higher than in our church, subdued lights were burning. It seemed impossible that such a terrible tragedy as that of the morning could have happened in a country where such religion was. The chapel was full of knights, standing, and at one side I saw the Princess, who rose from her seat as I entered.

Two priests led me to the foot of the steps on which the altar stood, and by the altar was the chief priest, he who had questioned me yesterday. As soon as I had knelt he began to chant a prayer, a kind of litany in which the other priests joined. The litany ended, there was a chant in praise of the Being who ruled man's destiny, and other prayers, all chanted, followed. I was struck with the beauty of the language used, but through all there ran a tone of mystery and uncertainty concerning the Being they were addressed to. Sometimes Khrym seemed to mean only the mountain, and then again it seemed only another name for God.

Then the chief priest, standing before the altar, faced me, and began a long exhortation to me. I was instructed to lay aside all the wickedness in me, and during the night of vigil to prepare myself for my great mission. Other knights had kept the vigil, and had been faithful, but I was different to other knights in that, by special command of Khrym, who ruled the destinies of the land, I had come to bring

victory to the cause of right, and to stamp out all vileness.

“Through your day, Sir Knight, be faithful, and when your evening comes, lie down under the shadow of the great mountain. Sunset and sunrise shall not disturb your slumber, until one morn sunrise, kissing the mighty hills, shall awaken you in a new land, where warriors rest and sunset comes not.”

A low chant followed, during which every one left the chapel. The lights went out, except two burning dimly upon the altar, and I was left alone.

All night long I knelt before the altar, keeping my vigil.

And lest it should seem to some that I was carrying the part I played too far, I may say that it was a very real vigil to me. Might I not have been sent to Drussenland for some great purpose? With a voice in the laws, I might stop murder, perhaps teach a better religion. One thing was made clear by the priest's exhortation. Not as a saint had I come, but as a warrior. I was commanded to lay aside all wickedness, and I was therefore only a man, not a being to be worshipped. That it might be otherwise had troubled me.

It was a long night, one of the longest I ever spent, and I do not deny that, had I been free to do as I chose, my vigil would have been much shorter. I welcomed the first light of dawn that crept into the chapel, and began to listen for coming footsteps.

At last a flourish of trumpets sounded. The doors were opened, and I was led by the priests into the council hall where the knights were assembled. They welcomed me with a salute of drawn swords, and

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those who had been chosen beforehand, all men valiant in arms, buckled on my harness until I stood clothed in complete steel. On my breast was a raised device, a star in silver, and a like star was upon my helmet. With a shout the knights accepted me as a comrade in arms.

This ceremony over, we left the hall, and in the courtyard horses were being led by pages. O’Ryan stood beside mine, and I noticed that he had a serviceable sword at his side.

“All goes well,” he whispered as I mounted, and a look of relief came into his face when he saw that I knew how to manage a horse.

We clattered through the town a goodly company, and many were in the street to see us pass. Armour add height to a man, and I dare say I looked an imposing figure, but I felt extremely awkward. I was a fairly good horseman, but a coat of mail requires getting accustomed to.

Through the gates we went to the camp. A large body of soldiers was drawn up in an open space, evidently awaiting our coming, and as we approached, Princess Daria came towards us. Being instructed by one of my comrades, I dismounted, and went to meet her, and drawing my sword — I fear it was rather slovenly done, for it was the first time in my life that I attempted to do such a thing—I gave it to her, holding it by the blade and presenting to her the hilt. She took it from me, and as I knelt, laid it lightly across my left shoulder, saying—

“Rise, Sir Knight, Knight of the Silver Star. Thrice welcome are you. See you be a faithful knight.”

She returned me the sword, and although I had

not been told to do so, I kissed it before I sheathed it. She smiled, and Count Vasca, who stood beside her, frowned. What did his frown signify now? We were both knights!

It was a day of rejoicing in the town and in the camp. Much feasting was there, and in a great hall the knights sat down to revelry. As in the civilized world, so in Drussenland—a very small matter served as an excuse for a very large banquet. Count Vasca ruled the feast, and it was easy to see that there were two parties amongst us, those who loved him and those who did not. The comrade who had instructed me in the morning sat beside me, and I soon found that he hated the Count—or, as he called him, Vasca, Knight of the Red Cloud. Each knight had some such distinctive title, my comrade's being Walen, Knight of the Black Stone. Walen I judged to be a few years my senior, and since he was one of those who had buckled on my armour, he was doubtless famous for valorous deeds.

"Vasca rules the feast," he said. "He would like to rule the land."

"You do not love him?" I asked.

"I know him for a valiant soldier," was the careful answer.

"And are they many who love him?"

"We are equally divided, else Vasca would not rule the feast as he does to-night."

Since the Count was likely to be my bitter enemy, this information was very interesting. In the struggle with him, which I knew must come sooner or later, I should not be alone.

Whether it was the wine, or a desire to lull any suspicion I might have of him, I cannot tell, but the

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Count consented to be merry. Much toasting was there, and I am inclined to think we should have made but a poor defence had resolute men attacked us towards the close of that feast. I drank sparingly, but I was the only one who did so.

The Count had risen not too steadily to propose a new toast, when, without any warning, the doors were thrown open, and the Princess entered. The knights stood up in surprise. Never before, so I learned, had she honored such a banquet.

She advanced to the head of the table, and calling for a cup of wine, held it at arm's length.

"Your Princess gives you a toast: To the Knight of the Silver Star."

Every cup was drained, and the Princess left the hall. The Count resumed his seat, a black scowl upon his face, and the feast was ended. The two parties were more distinct than ever, for while some of the knights left the hall with me, others gathered round Vasca, looking as angry as he did.

"The Princess has made him your enemy for all time," said Walen.

"The Silver Star shall shine through the Red Cloud," I said.

"And there are swords in plenty to help," said one, drawing his weapon a little, and sending it home again with a clash.

"Swords in plenty," they said in chorus.

So at the foot of the stairs leading to my quarters we parted. I had spoken brave words enough. It remained for me to do brave deeds.

CHAPTER VII**THE CHALLENGE**

QUARTERS overlooking the square were assigned to me and my esquire, O’Ryan. I had sought adventure, and certainly I had found it. I had stepped from a position of grave danger to that of being an important personage at the Court of Princess Daria, but my thankfulness for the turn affairs had taken was not free from anxiety for the future. Important persons have generally done something remarkable, or, at least, have had wit enough to make people believe that they have, while I had done nothing, and was, moreover, doubtful if I was capable of doing anything particular. I had made no mark in the civilized world—was I likely to do any better here?

“We must pray for the quick arrival of action,” said O’Ryan. “Inactivity will be our ruin.”

“I can stand a few days’ rest,” I answered gloomily.

O’Ryan pointed from the window to where the camp lay outside the walls.

“There are plenty of men to pay and mouths to fill yonder, and, unless I am much mistaken, not too much to pay and fill them with. Fighting, we can at least hope to gain distinction, but with peace holding the reins you will be expected to find this treasure. Remember, it’s the treasure they want you for, not for fighting.”

"True enough."

"We can't afford to wait. You'll be a great man in the council. Make the best use of your power, and let's have war."

I smiled. O'Ryan had become used to war, I had not. Therein lay the difference. Still, I knew O'Ryan was right, and I found it convenient to be warlike in council, and at the same time clothe myself with a certain mystery, as though every word I uttered had some political significance, and every action was a move in some elaborate plan, the whole of which I had as yet no intention of disclosing.

I paid assiduous attention to my military duties in the camp, looked sharply after the men who were my especial charge, and in my leisure hours took lessons from O'Ryan in the manipulation of a sword. I knew something of the art of fencing, but it assisted me little in sword exercise as understood by my worthy esquire. I may have been taught badly, or O'Ryan's knowledge may have been rudimentary, but whichever way it was, he and I seemed to be altogether on a different basis when we first stood up to each other. I fancy I was the prettier to watch, but that does not do away with the fact that I should have been a corpse in less than two minutes had the bout been one in real earnest.

"It's pluck and a strong arm you want," he said.

"And science," I suggested.

"Science? Oh, yes, all very nice in its way, pretty in a fencing school, but when it comes to real fighting, with your life behind the flashing fire of your weapon, it's just hack, hack, hack, and the one who can do it longest and strongest wins. I know—I've done it."

It is not for me to defend his opinion, and he

certainly taught me something, finding me an ap- pupil, I imagine, since he ultimately confessed that he would rather teach me fighting than fight me.

It was something to have a more friendly understanding with my sword; it gave me more confidence so far as individuals were concerned, but it did not relieve my anxiety regarding events. Each day it became more apparent that I was expected to make a move of some sort, to suggest something, to do something to prove that I had a mission. Those of Count Vasca's party had already come to the conclusion that I was an imposter—which, no doubt, in a sense I was—and those who favored me seemed anxious to have me speak and act plainly. One of my greatest difficulties was to know how much was expected of me, how far they believed my power to be supernatural. The Princess, I saw, watched me very closely, whether in the council or in attendance at Court, and I would have given much to know her real opinion of me. I cudgelled my brain to think how I could discover it. No, it was hardly personal interest in her then—rather the thought of my own safety. At that time she was only one of the pieces on the board in the game I had to play. Later—well, later she became something more. There was one other who also watched me keenly, whether with an evil motive or otherwise, I could not at first tell. He was a priest named Jasar, a tall, thin, ascetic man, who was unlike his brethren and no great favorite with them, his views, I believe, being unorthodox. He was, however, accounted very learned, and this gave him power, added to which he was a great favorite with the Princess, who was constantly guided by him, even when his opinion was diametric-

ally opposed to the general opinion of the knights. He was a foe or a friend to be reckoned with. I was soon destined to feel his power.

The days passed into weeks slowly, yet not monotonously. I worked hard in the camp and with O’Ryan perfecting myself in the use of the weapons of the Drussenlanders. Also, accompanied by a small troop of soldiers, I made excursions amongst the neighboring hills, letting it be understood that I had commenced my search for the treasure. It was dangerous to do nothing, yet my soul revolted at the deception I practised. I began to long for war, as a way out of my difficulties, almost as fervently as O’Ryan did.

I returned from a council one day more anxious than usual. Signs of dissatisfaction at my inactivity had been apparent, and even my friends seemed to nurse their friendship carefully as if they had no desire to be identified as partisans of the weaker side should a determined struggle take place. On entering my apartments I found O’Ryan waiting for me impatiently.

“You look depressed. You have heard the news?”

“What news?” I asked.

“That a tournament is to be held in your honor.”

“No, I have heard nothing of it.”

“It’s bad news, Verrall; the first conspiracy against you,” said O’Ryan. “They are going to put you to the test too soon for my liking.”

In his capacity as my esquire, O’Ryan was able to mix with people I had no opportunity of approaching, and what he had overheard or found out had been of great use to me before this. I knew by his manner that the news was serious.

"Tell me all about it," I said.

"They were full of it in the courtyard this morning," O'Ryan answered. "Faith, you were not wanting in supporters, I admit, and I had to bluster with the best of them to keep up appearances; but it was a heavy heart I had, Verrall. Vasca is at the bottom of it. He will challenge you, and makes no secret of his opinion that you are an imposter, and that you will go down before his skill like a dead branch lopped off by the storm."

"And he is probably right," I answered.

"Of course he is. I don't doubt your pluck, Verrall, but you've had no practice."

"Therefore there can be no dishonor."

"Sure, it's not the honor or dishonor I'm thinking of; it's the result. A knight sent from Khrym has got no right to bite the dust at his first encounter, and as sure as you do, you won't have a friend amongst the lot of them."

"A cheerful outlook," I said, with a forced laugh. "What shall we fight with—swords?"

"Lances; a fierce charge across the arena, and then——"

"Dust biting," I suggested.

"It's no jesting matter. This Vasca, I hear, has never been worsted, and it's no light game he'll play at this tournament, I warrant. If he can put an end to your adventure, my boy, he will. Have you ever used a lance?"

"I have learnt how to handle one since I came here."

"But have you ever charged at anything with it?"

"No."

"Then you don't know what a devil's toy it is to

play with. There's only one thing to be done—we must get out of it somehow."

"You have an idea?"

"Plenty—but they don't fit in. You might say that they don't use lances where you come from."

"Perfectly true, since what remain of them are chiefly stored for show in the Tower of London," I answered; "but I don't think the excuse would carry weight in Drussenland."

"Or you might suggest that you weren't sent to play at fighting, but to do the real thing. That might hold water. It's the best excuse I can think of."

"And just no good at all. Why, the Princess would not look at me again."

"She won't look very pleasant at you when you're grovelling in the dust either. You don't seem to understand the seriousness of the business."

"Oh, yes, I do, O'Ryan; but we're in Drussenland, and we've got to be Drussenlanders. If Vasca challenges me, I'll accept the challenge, and trust to luck."

"You talk as if you were going to take a hand at cards."

"Well, it is a game of chance, and up to now we have held the trumps. When is this tournament to be?"

"At once, to-morrow or the next day. It is only for the Princess to decide."

"There is a Court to-night."

O'Ryan nodded.

"Come, man, lighten your heart a little. We're not tied to the posts in the square yet."

"It's a question of time, I'm thinking. I'd feel a deal safer in Yadasara."

To say that I had no plan in my mind when I

attended Court that night would be untrue. I had half-a-dozen at least, any one of which seemed to provide for all emergencies, and yet I knew that I was quite likely to act upon impulse at the last moment. A sudden decision has often been productive of the best results. I had one fixed idea as I entered the hall, and that was not to let Count Vasca get the better of me if I could possibly prevent it.

I was a late arrival upon a more than usually brilliant scene. Here in Drussenland it was much the same as at home, more color and freedom than there would be as such a function in the old country, perhaps, but the same foundation to both—political intrigue and personal interest. Pretty women talked scandal with each other, or tried their arts of fascination upon valorous men; eyes asked fateful questions and flashed back answers, while laughter rippled genuinely or sounded hollow. Gather men and women together, and whether civilization has dressed their words in seeming courtesy or old-time freedom allows a greater license, self-interest is certain to stalk overtly around them, and love and hatred play at cross-purposes.

The first man I encountered was Walen.

"I have been waiting for you," he said. "There is mischief brewing. It hangs in the air to-night. Vasca and some of his party have been pressing round the Princess ever since she came in."

"And she is pleased with such attention?" I asked.

Walen shrugged his shoulders.

"I could read neither pleasure nor displeasure in her face. Few can read her, Verrall, if she chooses that they shall not."

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"That is true. Even a Princess cannot help being a woman."

My Western cynicism fell flat upon this Eastern warrior.

"Vasca has a persuasive tongue, and he is her kinsman. That counts for something."

"For much, my dear Walen. It is difficult to refuse a kinsman, and kinsmen, knowing this, take advantage and ask hard things. I will learn more of this intrigue."

"And speak carefully," he cautioned. "Much depends upon your caution."

Who could know that better than I did? Were confirmation needed, it came in the many glances directed towards me as I made my way to the top of the hall where Princess Daria was.

I had many friends and many enemies, and among the latter many women. I had persistently refused to be inveigled into any love affairs, and since I was a presentable knight—why not be honest!—I was in no great favor with fair dames who lived chiefly to applaud warriors and rule lovers with Beauty's tyranny. Do not for a moment imagine that I was indifferent; the veriest anchorite would have abandoned his profession in Drussenland; but—well, I had other matters to think of.

"Sir Verrall."

It was a woman who called me as I was making my way through the crowd, and I could not refuse to answer her beckoning finger. She was standing, one of a little group of dames and cavaliers, tricked out most tastefully, leaders of fashion in the Court of Princess Daria. I knew the woman, as meddling and a little vixen as existed, although a dozen swords

would have been only too willing to give me the lie had I said so. Her beauty allowed her to be petulant and overbearing, and I have an idea she wished to make me one of her slaves.

"Is what we hear true?" she asked, as, bowing low, I joined the party.

"Who would dare to speak anything but the truth to the Lady Aldrida?"

"As ready as ever with words, Sir Verrall," said a young jackanapes, a Drussenland type of Piccadilly lounge. I cannot better describe him.

"And deeds, too, Sir Knight, if deeds are called for," I answered, touching the hilt of my sword. I had soon got used to this outward and visible sign of courage.

"You are quick to take offence where none was intended."

I accepted the statement as an apology, although I was quite certain that he lied.

"I am a soldier first, a courtier afterwards," I answered. "Pardon my shortcomings."

"Is it true, then?" said Lady Aldrida. "I was afraid we were to be disappointed."

"I should grieve to disappoint you. Will you tell me what is expected of me?"

"It is whispered that there is to be a grand tournament, and that you are to hold the field against all comers. Since we have never seen your prowess, is it wonderful that we are excited?" and she laughed.

That laugh explained a good deal. Evidently I was not amongst friends. I had doubtless been freely criticized before my advent that evening. Vasca's scheme, which he had arranged should be well whispered about, had appealed strongly to the dis-

believers in my genuineness. Here was one little group of scoffers. How many others there were in the hall I could not tell. And somehow no one of my plans seemed to fit the occasion.

"I have heard nothing of it," I answered; "but if a word from me can save you disappointment, Lady Aldrida, be assured it shall be spoken."

She clapped her hands in childish delight. Dangerous women, I have observed, often affect the innocence of a child.

"I would offer you my scarf as a token, Sir Verrall, had I not a knight to be jealous."

"Say rather a hundred, Lady Aldrida, or you do yourself a grave injustice."

"A sword as keen as your wit should ensure success; yet how few excel in both!"

She dropped me a little mocking curtsy, gracefully done, as indeed was all she did. She would have planted a dagger in the back of her best friend gracefully. It required no deep penetration on my part to know that she was laughing at me, nor that she had the entire approbation of her friends in doing so. I had arrived none too soon. I was in a tight corner, and the time had come to act. A bold move could alone save my position.

I made my way as quickly as I could towards the Princess. The priest Jasar was beside her, so was Count Vasca, and those standing about her were waiting anxiously for some word from her. There was a look of annoyance in her face which was banished by a smile as I approached.

"You come at a convenient time, Sir Verrall," she said, giving me her hand to kiss. "Your name is on every lip to-night, it seems."

"I rejoice, your Highness, if I am fairly spoken of."

"I would call to account any man who spoke otherwise of the Knight of the Silver Star," said Vasca.

The Princess looked at him, so did the priest.

"I have been suggesting a brave display, Sir Verrall," he went on airily, as though we had been the greatest of friends, "a display to make young hearts beat with pleasure, and bright eyes sparkle with excitement. The Princess has not yet given her consent. Will you not add your persuasion to mine?"

"You have worked in secret, Count Vasca, or my persuasion should have seconded yours before this. Is it true that you would have me keep the field against all comers? Surely you do me too much honor."

"Do you desire this mimic combat, Sir Verrall?" asked the Princess.

She asked the question strangely, I thought, and I saw that Jasar's eyes were fixed upon me. I would have given much to be able to speak truthfully, and declare that I desired nothing in the world less; but truth, of course, was out of the question.

"Most heartily, your Highness. Yet, why should I be so honored to destroy the delight of so many? To hold the field against so many gallant warriors were impossible. Let me succeed once, twice—a dozen times; still, I am but human, and my arm can feel fatigue. How say you, Count Vasca? Young hearts beat highest when young lovers do bravely. Let lovers break a lance for those they love, and since few hearts hold me dear enough to beat the faster at my coming, you and I will break a lance for honor's sake."

“A challenge! A challenge!” said some about us. It may have been fancy, but I thought the Princess paled a little.

“It is bravely spoken,” said Jasar, and his eyes turned from me to the Princess.

“May I venture to persuade your Highness in this matter?” I said, bowing low before her.

Rather unwillingly she gave her consent. I should have been better pleased had she withheld it.

“I accept the challenge. No love creeps into our combat, Sir Verrall. You have so willed it. Let it be for honor.”

Count Vasca laughed as he turned on his heel and joined some of his friends. The news that the challenge had been given and accepted passed like magic through the hall. At any rate, I had only one man to fight, that was better than having a dozen one after the other. I remained beside the Princess.

“You have chosen a strong adversary,” she said in a low tone.

“I had no alternative, your Highness. I had to accept or give the challenge. I preferred to give it. Have I offended you?”

“You have not offended me.”

The priest moved a little farther from us.

“You have heard nothing of this projected tournament until to-night?”

“I heard of it to-day from my esquire.”

She exchanged a quick glance with the priest, which I could not read. I did not understand her well, the priest I did not understand at all.

“Sir Verrall, you have my good wishes. The test is one I would not willingly have put you to.”

“Your good wishes are a sure armor, your High-

ness," I said, stooping to pick up the handkerchief she dropped. Our eyes met as our hands touched over the handkerchief which I held to her. A look in them gave me courage.

"Add only this favor," I said. "Let me keep this handkerchief as my token."

"You fight for honor, Sir Verrall!" she answered quickly.

"For honor and for the approval of my Princess."

She turned from me with a heightened color, and with Jasar joined her suite, but she left the handkerchief in my hand.

CHAPTER VIII

“TO ACHIEVEMENT, KNIGHTS!”

I STOOD bending over the handkerchief for a moment, and then hastily concealed it. Perhaps the wish was father to the thought that the Princess desired the episode to pass unnoticed by any one else. There is a distinct pleasure in having a little secret with a beautiful woman, and when that woman happens to be, for the time being at least, your liege mistress, it is comforting to know that you possess her good wishes. Truly, I wanted some comfort under the circumstances, although I must confess that in the excitement of receiving such a mark of royal favor I had almost forgotten what occasioned the gift until rudely reminded by Walen, as we left the hall together.

“I fear you have played into Vasca’s hands, Verrall,” he said.

“Or he into mine.”

“True, or he into yours. It is difficult to judge.”

“Knowing so little of me, you would say,” I went on, putting, I knew, his thoughts into words. “My dear Walen, I ask only a fair field and no favor. A few true friends and a good cause, and success is half won.”

“Men fall in a good cause, Verrall.”

"To prove that it is good to those who remain," I answered.

I spoke boldly, laughingly. Even to my best friend I could not afford to show any dissatisfaction at the course events had taken.

Ill news gets abroad quickly, and O'Ryan had heard what had taken place before I joined him. His preliminary remarks will not permit of being chronicled here. Once before I think I have spoken of the proportions of his vocabulary in the matter of oaths, and these he reeled off for my benefit with the speed and clearness of a rocket line flung out to sea. I could only wait patiently until he had finished. The end was tame, considering.

"Verrall, you're an almighty fool. Sure, it's sorry I am to be compelled to tell you the truth."

"I don't fancy you've succeeded in doing it now. There was nothing for it but a bold move."

"It was bold enough, but infernally silly, for all that."

"My dear fellow, the end would have been the same whatever position I had taken up. Vasca had determined to force me into this fight and to leave no loophole for escape. Better, surely, to grip the situation firmly and trust to luck."

"Luck!" he exclaimed. "I know what Vasca can do; you don't."

"I very soon shall."

"I'd like to change places with you," O'Ryan said.

"A piece of national conceit. My lance-play may be as good as yours."

"Sure, that's not it at all. The one who fights dies fighting, the one who is left dies there. I'm the one who's left; that is what troubles me," and he waved

his hand towards the square. The one thing which unnerved O'Ryan was the thought of dying without being able to strike a blow in self-defence.

"It's a bad sign when a man barks as loudly as Vasca does," I said.

"That's a sound enough argument when civilization has knocked half the fighting-power out of a man, but it's just meaningless here. In Drussenland a man daren't bark unless he can bite. I'd give a good deal to be back in Yadasara. The place is full of blackguards, to be sure, but they're blackguards you can understand—none of these tournament businesses and nonsense of that kind."

"I'd give a good deal to be back in England, O'Ryan, if it comes to that."

"Are you quite honest in saying so?" he asked.

"Quite. Why not?"

"There's this Princess Daria."

I believe I almost blushed, thinking of the handkerchief.

"Well, what of her?"

He shut one eye slowly.

"She's a pretty woman, Verrall."

"Very."

"A loveable woman."

"I hardly know enough about her to endorse that."

"I heard it said that she would not be displeased if you managed to unhorse Vasca."

"Ah, servants always know so much more about their masters than the masters know about themselves," I said hastily, with some annoyance.

"Pardon me, Verrall," said O'Ryan angrily,

“there is no question of master and servant between us.”

“My dear fellow, I did not mean that.”

It took me sometime to pacify him. As a matter of fact, I had forgotten how we stood towards each other. Acting had become such reality.

There were three days of waiting before the tournament, three days in which I had to steel myself to behave calmly as usual, three days during which I could hardly remain still for a moment. O’Ryan, good fellow as he was, was not much comfort. He was so convinced that our undoing was at hand that he could not bring himself to utter words of encouragement. During these days, too, I did not see Princess Daria. She held neither court nor council, and so far as I knew did not leave her own apartments in the palace. Even Walen, who was a true ally, was unable to help me. Probably he knew Vasca’s prowess as well as anybody, and his silence was therefore the more disconcerting. Few good or brave deeds have been accomplished without some lips to whisper encouragement, so I was in a sorry plight indeed.

The lists were set close to the camp, an oval piece of level turf enclosed by tiers of seats, enough, it seemed to me, to accommodate the whole town even if every man, woman, and child turned out to see the sport. Truly I use the word advisedly, for the anticipation savored little of sport to me.

The day dawned bright and sunny, but with a keenness in the air which perhaps my nervous excitement exaggerated. I woke early, and never, surely, have hours been so leaden-winged as they were that morning.

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"We will not be the first to arrive," said O'Ryan, curbing my impatience. "It would only be to show anxiety.

"Which, of course, we do not feel," I said, with a nervous laugh.

"Which, at any rate, we must not show," he answered, examining the edge of his sword and testing its easy withdrawal from the scabbard.

"One would imagine that you were preparing for battle," I said, after watching him for some time in silence.

"So I am," he answered shortly.

"I thought I was chiefly concerned to-day," I said.

"And sure that's where you are blind, and therefore selfish. The moment you roll over there'll be a cry of rage against you, and it's no good my saying I'll come to help you because I won't have a chance. I'll have my work cut and dried for me with the scoundrels who'll wreak their vengeance upon me, and by Saint Patrick I'll die fighting."

"Cheerful words," I said.

"Sure, I'm not a believer in miracles, and it's only a miracle can save you."

He made me angry, and I gave up attempting to talk to him. His doleful prophecies were of little use to me. We waited in silence until it was time to go, and in silence we rode to the camp.

Plentiful as the accommodation in the lists had seemed to me, it was evidently not too much. Every seat, every point of vantage had been taken. There were two entrances reserved for the knights who were to take part in the day's proceedings, facing each other, and shut off from the arena by a barrier which was only opened to let a knight pass in to combat.

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Standing near one of these by my charger, O’Ryan beside me, I surveyed the scene like a man in a dream. Silken flags were everywhere, and a sea of faces, all excitement and anxiety. On one side of the lists was a gallery, in which were the marshal and his heralds, and opposite a similar gallery, where Princess Daria sat with her retinue. My eyes were riveted on this gallery, but I could not tell whether she had noticed me, or whether she looked anxious or indifferent.

“Better watch the fighting, Verrall,” said O’Ryan in my ear. “You may learn something then.”

That he should have discovered the direction of my glances annoyed me, but his advice had wisdom in it.

It was sport to most there, doubtless, but dangerous sport for all that. Deep wounds were given, not to the body, although there were some of these, but to pride—far harder wounds to bear. Many a knight who passed into the arena full of confidence, and with a smile upon his lip, passed out with anger and an oath, telling of hatred to be treasured up for a fitting opportunity. In spite of myself, I felt interest in each combat, and glad when a friendly knight proved victor.

“Your time approaches, Verrall,” said O’Ryan, looking to the harness of my horse.

“I do not see the Count.”

“He is probably yonder.” And he pointed to the opposite entrance. “Do not be afraid; he will not disappoint you.”

I laughed, but there was little merriment in it.

“There is one thing it is well to remember,” O’Ryan said. “If you are horseman enough to do it, a sudden swerve just before your lances meet is advan-

tageous. It spoils your enemy's aim, and gives you an opportunity of planting a surer blow."

"I shall not forget," I answered, and I forgot his advice next moment.

If you would unnerve a man keep him in suspense; there is nothing like it for breeding fears, for culturing small misgivings into giant terrors. Although I knew the danger I was about to face, I was right glad when the waiting time was over, when the moment for action came. O'Ryan assisted me to mount, the barrier was thrown open, and I rode into the lists.

The trumpets sounded, and a roar of welcome came from a thousand throats. Other combats had excited, but my entrance heralded the performance which had brought this crowd together. I doubt not I looked an imposing figure. My height and breadth has never allowed me to pass unnoticed, and clad in glittering mail, with lance and shield, I must at least have looked a warrior. As I rode past the gallery the marshal and his attendants rose to give me courteous welcome. So had they risen to each knight as he entered the lists; but there was keener criticism in their eyes as they rose to me. Some friends I had amongst them, some enemies; I could probably have divided friends from foes by the expression on their faces. I kept my horse well in hand. I had no desire now to show off gallantly; the business before me was too serious, and might all too soon give the lie to my warlike appearance. Slowly I walked the horse round the lists until I was opposite the gallery in which Princess Daria sat. A waving of handkerchiefs greeted me, most flaunting of them all, I fancied, being Lady Aldrida's. There was a mock-

ery in the flutter of it, and a sneer in the pretty woman's smile. At any rate she would not be disappointed. I had promised that she should not be, and I had kept my word. Here was some consolation, for I think the women in that gallery were mostly my enemies—the reason I have before mentioned. The Princess rose, and I saluted her gravely, wondering if at that moment the same thought ran through both our brains—the thought of the handkerchief which she had given, and which even then was lying close to my heart. Then I rode back and stood beneath the marshal's gallery.

“Heralds, sound the challenge of the Knight of the Silver Star—once!” he cried.

The trumpets' music filled the air, and before the echoes had died amongst the hills, the barrier at the opposite side of the lists to which I had entered was thrown open, and Count Vasca rode into the arena. I marvelled not at the shout which welcomed him. He was a magnificent figure, horse and man seeming as one as the animal was reined in before the marshal. The Count's bearing was full of confidence, and I certainly could not complain that I had not a foeman worthy of my steel.

“I accept the challenge,” he cried; and then, approaching me, he said in a lower voice: “No love creeps into our combat, Sir Verrall; you have willed that it shall be for honor.”

His manner was insolent. The repetition of the words he had used when the challenge was first given made me wonder if there might not be a deeper meaning in them now than formerly. Could he have witnessed the giving of the handkerchief? He well might have done so, for I had had no disposition to

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watch any one, nor even to think of any one, but the Princess at that moment. Brave words were idle when my power to defend them was about to be so severely tested; but his insolence unloosed my tongue.

"For honor, Count Vasca, and for love, too, if you will," I answered defiantly.

"So soon a different tale! Danger gives increasing beauty to a fair face likely to be lost."

"It is rather to challenge you to your best. You harp on love so constantly, perchance honor is not enough to strengthen your arm against me."

A hiss of rage was his only answer. He made no attempt to conceal his feelings towards me, and may have understood mine equally well. The thousand eyes watching us expectantly must have felt that the quarrel between us was no mere child's play, no show to gratify a woman, by our impatient gestures as we turned our horses and rode apart from each other.

"To achievement, knights!" cried the herald. "Sound trumpets!"

As the blast rang out I turned my horse, and the next moment the Count and I were rushing madly at each other. In that instant my mind was a blank. Action had driven out even the thought of fear. We met. His lance shivered against my shield—a blow which shook me, but did not make me reel in the saddle. Either my aim was untrue or he avoided the blow, for my lance only glanced along his armor, and I continued my rush towards the opposite side of the lists. Perhaps there was some surprise that I was still in the saddle, a satisfaction that the combat was not to be a one-sided affair, that if not all I claimed to be, I was at least no craven carpet

knight; at any rate, a cheer rang out, and I felt encouraged.

Turning, I saw that the Count had been supplied with another lance and was ready to charge again. There was a moment's pause, then the trumpets sounded, and once more we rushed upon each other. The spirit of battle was upon me. I had more confidence, and I dug the spurs into my horse, leaning forward to the charge. Whether the Count had discovered my incompetency in the first encounter I do not know, but this time he appeared to take little trouble to avoid my blow so long as he could strike fair enough to throw me to the ground. We met with a crash that must have been appalling even to look at. We were both heavy men, mounted on heavy chargers.

I hardly knew what had happened, brought as I was to a sudden standstill by a blow which seemed to strike me full in the body. I reeled backwards, but my horse, being thrown upon his haunches, saved me, and with a mighty effort I succeeded in keeping my seat. As my horse struggled up, I regained my full consciousness, to find Vasca's horse also struggling to his feet, his rider still in the saddle, and to see that both our lances were broken short to the handle. My blow had been as fierce as his. Victory was with neither of us yet.

A great roar of applause arose around us as we passed to opposite sides of the lists. I felt shaken and dizzy, and should have been quite willing to divide the honors with my opponent had such a thing been possible. One thought took possession of me. Surely if now I should be worsted, I should have the credit of making a good fight, should have

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achieved enough to silence the tongues of those who declared me an impostor.

This time there was a longer pause before the trumpets sounded. Both of us had to be given a fresh lance, and probably the Count, like myself, felt the need of recovering himself a little before again rushing to the onslaught. I had no knowledge of how much of this kind of thing he could stand without showing signs of weakness, but I was perfectly sure that another blow like the last would be quite enough for me.

Again the trumpets blared out, sounding, it seemed to me, far off, and not ringing so clearly as before. I remember thinking, as I put my horse in motion for the third encounter, that the weaker sound could not be the fault of the trumpeters, that it must be a sign of my failing strength. The sudden knowledge that the combat must end if I were to hold my own, nerved my arm for a desperate effort. Better one more fierce encounter like the last, though we were both hurled from our saddles, and victory still rested with neither of us, than the necessity of a fourth mad charge. I doubted my ability to keep my saddle for a fourth encounter. Even now we seemed a long time reaching each other, and my eyes refused to see my enemy clearly as he came, yet I felt that he, too, wished to end the combat, that he, too, was bent on making a desperate endeavor. Gathering all my strength together, I rushed to meet him, and even as I did so, I remembered O'Ryan's advice. Perhaps even at that late moment I feared to receive such a blow as the last, but whatever the motive was that decided me, I acted upon the advice. I slightly checked my pace, and, as we met, I swerved a little,

and levelled my lance at Vasca's helmet. The sudden action made me reel, and had the Count's lance struck me then, I should have been unhorsed. But fortune favored me. Vasca attempted to alter his course in a similar manner, but his horse going faster than mine, stumbled forward. His lance missed me altogether, whilst mine only struck him lightly. It was not my blow that unseated him, but his stumbling charger. The Count made a frantic effort to keep his horse from falling, but in vain, and he rolled heavily from his saddle to the ground.

Shout after shout rent the air. Who could tell how the Count had fallen? The fact remained that, while he rolled in the dust, I remained in the saddle! So they shouted as men will at victory, satisfied and jubilant.

"Sir Verrall! Sir Verrall! The Knight of the Silver Star!"

I sat still, dazed, quivering in every limb, only half-conscious that the shouting proclaimed me victor.

The Count struggled to his feet.

"A stumbling steed is no knight's dishonor. Another horse!" he cried, "or on foot, Sir Verrall, as you will."

I sat still and mute. As through a mist I saw waving hands in the galleries. As through a thick fog I heard my name and Vasca's. A cry for the victor drowned by another cry that the battle was not yet done, that another horse should be brought, or the fight continued on foot. Either for the one or the other I was unprepared. Sounds and sights were mixed in strange confusion. I sat in my saddle stunned almost.

The sharp note of a bugle aroused me somewhat. For an instant I fancied it the summons to another charge, and turned my horse mechanically. But there was other business in hand. A blare of trumpets had summoned to the mimic battle, but this was one sharp, long-drawn note, a note of alarm always in Drussenland. The shouting ceased, hands no longer waved. I think I saw the Princess rise and leave her gallery suddenly; I know that there was a mass of movement on all sides of the lists. Knights and soldiers rushed across the turf, and I was borne along with them to the barrier.

“To arms! To arms!” was now the cry on every side.

“Bravely done, Sir Verrall!” and I saw O’Ryan press towards me through the crowd.

“What is it?” I said, almost in a whisper.

“Faith, it’s what suits us best—real fighting. The enemy are in force before the town.”

“I—I——” and then I should have slipped from my saddle, had not O’Ryan literally lifted me to the ground.

CHAPTER IX

UNDER THE WALLS OF YADASARA.

THE excitement at the news of coming conflict was so great that, fortunately, little notice was taken of me, and O’Ryan managed to get me away quietly. To have fainted after a combat, however fierce, would doubtless have lowered the worth of my victory in the eyes of the Drussenlanders, and having achieved so much, it was well that I should lose nothing by such a small matter as a fainting-fit. A deep draught of wine gathered my scattered senses together, but it did not put much firmness into my trembling limbs. I managed to get back to my quarters, and once there, O’Ryan plied me with more wine.

“Do you want to rob me of what little sense I have?” I said.

“Anything to make you sleep for a few hours,” O’Ryan answered. “You have a short time to rest before we go out against the enemy.”

“Did any one notice that I fainted?”

“No; I took care of that. Not a soul knows but what you were still full of fight when the summons to more serious business came—more serious, that is, to some, but far less to us, Verrall.”

“You laughed this morning when I spoke of luck.”

“Luck! Don’t say the word. Sure, it wasn’t luck at all, but fine fighting.”

I could not help laughing at his brogue. He was excited, and was very Irish.

"You've done a fine thing, Verrall, and I'm proud of you. That Vasca got more than he ever expected, and I wouldn't have given the smallest potato patch in Ireland for your chance this morning."

"Luck, O'Ryan, pure luck."

"Don't let that blackguard Vasca hear you say it. He'll believe you; I won't."

I was only human, and it was pleasant to lie at full length, stretching my weary limbs, listening to O'Ryan sounding my praises. There was no need to answer him. He talked on incessantly, and as the wine began to take effect upon me, and I slipped into that mystic region between waking and sleeping, his voice seemed to change from monotone to melody. The intense strain of the day was loosened, the danger was over; almost I believed that luck had had nothing to do with my success, and then—then dreams came, light fancies, feathers borne on the bosom of a summer wind; whispering voices calling softly, "Daria," and then a vision of her with arms outstretched, a smile upon her lips, radiant as the smile of morning; and then, before I could hear her speak, before I could throw myself at her feet, deep sleep with no dream in it.

"Time, Verrall."

I started up.

"You ought to be rested," said O'Ryan. "I've been shaking you long enough; and, by Saint Patrick, your snoring has been mighty."

It was early morning. The world at our feet was still in twilight, but the top of Khrym had caught

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the sun. I felt refreshed, but certainly not in condition for a hard day's fighting.

"It's to be real war this time, not games," said O'Ryan, with evident satisfaction, looking carefully to his armor and his sword.

"The other was no game to me, and I would sooner wait a little while for the real fighting," I answered.

Weary as my limbs still were, sleep had refreshed me, and, once out in the clear morning air, I began to feel myself again.

The camp was in considerable confusion as O'Ryan and I rode in. Certainly at any other time I should have passed unnoticed, but after yesterday I was a man of more importance than I had ever been in this country or in any other.

Several knights with their men-at-arms had left before we arrived, and even as we passed the first lines of the camp, a troop, obedient to the word of command, swung round, and went towards the open country in the direction of Yadasara. The men regarded me with increased interest, and the knights saluted.

"You're a much bigger man than you were yesterday," said O'Ryan.

I was proud that I was so. True, luck had favored me, but why not employ it as capital? Is there any capital in the world so useful as good luck? Confident in myself, I spurred my horse forward, little thinking that a bitter disappointment was in store for me.

Surrounded by her guards and by several knights, the Princess was in earnest conversation with Count Vasca as I went to salute her. Naturally her mind

was full of anxious thought, and I should not have noticed her casual acceptance of me had not a knight saluted her just before me. To him she smiled graciously; to me she gave a bare acknowledgment, and turned immediately to Count Vasca. I thought she laughed with him, and although I could not say it was at me, in my chagrin I thought so. Had she seen how lucky I had been yesterday? Had her good wishes been really with her kinsman? There is nothing more humiliating than recognizing the folly of a fond dream. That those around her received me with some enthusiasm was a poor consolation. I cared for no praise but hers. Perhaps I exaggerated the coldness of her reception. Surely it was natural. I had expected much; I found nothing.

I had little time to sullenly nurse my disappointment, for Count Vasca came to me.

"Your prowess yesterday argues ill for many a brave knight yonder in Yadasara," he said.

"You are gracious to say so, Count," I answered.

"Truly, I speak only as I have cause to know. I can prove honestly a friend, although I fear you do not so consider me."

"I have a habit of being honest, too."

"Which means that you do not believe me?"

"I have judged by actions," I said.

"I ask no more than that you continue to do so," he answered with a smile. "I have enemies, Sir Verrall, who doubtless think it wisdom to make a friend of you. They are worthy of no consideration, either as friends or enemies. Men should find respect for each other when they have stood face to face as you and I did yesterday."

"I have respect, Count Vasca."

"I, more than respect," he replied quickly. "If until yesterday I held you cheaply, pardon me; I did not know you. Now we should be friends. Do not deny me."

He held out his hand, and I took it. I could do no less, and his frankness almost deceived me.

"There is work before us," he went on. "You will march your men towards Yadasara. To-night, maybe, we will pledge our friendship in a cup of wine. Perhaps to-morrow we shall ride side by side in pleasant rivalry against our common enemies."

A few moments later I passed from the camp with my troop. Again I saluted the Princess, and again received scant recognition, or I thought so.

It was a long day's march, and twilight was settling over the plain when we reached the camp pitched by those who had preceded us. That night I drank the cup of friendship in Vasca's tent. I felt a villain for doing so. My long day's ride had given me ample time to think, and I had found a hundred motives behind his frankness. It did not ring true, considered side by side with Princess Daria's behavior. What could have chanced since the night she had given me the handkerchief to make him so courteous and her so cold?

"What new plot was Vasca hatching this morning?" asked O'Ryan, when we were alone that night.

"Becoming my friend," I answered.

"A fiendish plot, indeed. I would sooner have him as an enemy."

"We must wait and see, O'Ryan."

"Yes; and ride as far apart from him as possible, when we charge the enemy."

I remembered Vasca's words, his picture of pleasant rivalry.

"It is so easy to make a mistake when you ride as a friend beside your bitterest foe," he went on. "We have changed sham fighting for the real thing; but——"

"But still you are not satisfied," I laughed.

"No. We haven't left any of our dangers behind us, we've brought them all with us—excepting one."

"And that one?"

"The Princess."

I wondered if he had noted her treatment of me that morning, and even as I did so, I felt annoyed to think how sensitive to other people's opinion I had become.

"How could you expect we were going to leave our dangers behind?"

"I didn't expect that you were going to become such an important piece in the game, Verrall," he answered promptly.

"A kind of white elephant to you, eh?"

"Well, I confess to a partiality for less exalted personages to deal with in games of this kind. The greater you are, the more numerous are your enemies."

"And my friends?"

"Sometimes, Verrall, only sometimes. The friends who can be truly happy at a companion's pre-eminence are few, even in the civilized world. In a country like this, devil of a rule is there to go by."

"I do not quite see how the Princess is a danger," I said.

It gave me considerable pleasure to bring the conversation back to her.

"For the reason that she is a woman," he answered; "and, if you want an additional reason, because she is a Princess. At present, I believe she is your friend; but to-morrow—who knows? Why, even Bridget——"

"Bridget, who is she?"

"My wife in Yadasara. I told you about her."

"You never said her name was Bridget."

"Well, it isn't," O'Ryan answered. "It's Xenia, or some heathen name of that sort; but you couldn't expect me to go about calling her that, so I christened her Bridget, which smacks of the old country."

"And she did not object?"

"Object, is it! When I left Yadasara there wasn't a created man Bridget thought so much of as she did of me, but Saint Patrick alone knows what she'll think of me now. You can't rely on women. Faith! it's possible she won't believe my story when I get back."

"Even a man might be forgiven for expressing some doubt, O'Ryan."

"Of course, but you can knock the truth into a man, or try to. There's a prejudice against attempting to knock anything into a woman. It's a silly prejudice when you come to think of it."

O'Ryan looked into space thoughtfully. He was quite serious. There was a good deal of the barbarian in him.

"No, I don't trust women when it comes to matters of life and death," he went on. "Bridget, after all, is only an ordinary woman—superior, I grant, but just a woman, and the one we've left behind is a Princess. Left to herself, I don't say she mightn't do the right thing—fall in love with you, and marry,

you; but for political reasons she is just as likely to have you hanged, drawn, and quartered."

Remembering her attitude that morning, his remarks were not reassuring.

"Have you noticed any change in her manner to me?" I asked.

"I have been too busy watching others. One of us has got to do the watching, you know."

"And I don't, you would say."

"No offence, Verrall. We must stick together, and a man in love is seldom the man to act most cautiously. I quite sympathize; but, for both our sakes, I wish you did not think so much of Princess Daria."

Beyond making a gesture of impatience, I took no notice of the remark. There was nothing to answer. I could not deny that Princess Daria's goodwill was a great deal to me, but, at the same time, I had no intention of admitting as much to O'Ryan. To stop further argument upon the subject, I lay down on a heap of rugs, and fell asleep almost directly.

It had never occurred to me to doubt Count Vasca's ability as a leader. I had become used to hearing him spoken highly of, but during the next few days it did seem to my unpractised mind that he lost good opportunities. He knew the country and the enemy; I knew neither, and I therefore concluded that he knew best. Certainly his prediction of riding side by side in pleasant rivalry was not fulfilled. There was no occasion. We advanced slowly towards Yadasara, now and again having a skirmish with a scattered body of the enemy; but there was no attempt to draw the main body, which retreated as we advanced, into a decided engagement. Vasca's one idea was caution, and I was content to believe

that he had good reason for exercising it. I was not by nature a soldier, and my one desire was not to disgrace myself when the time came. To be quite honest, I was not altogether displeased that the enemy did retreat.

So we advanced slowly until we were under the walls of Yadasara, and yet it seemed to me that we had accomplished nothing.

"Are we going to attempt to take it by assault?" asked O'Ryan.

I shook my head. Although, with other knights, I was constantly in council with Count Vasca, I had no idea what his intention was. He looked sagacious, talked valiantly, but did nothing. Still, it was absurd to think that he was afraid, as O'Ryan suggested.

"You can never tell," O'Ryan said, when I laughed at the idea. "Such a stronghold might frighten the bravest man."

As he had spoken of Yadasara on the occasion of his first pointing the city out to me—how long ago it seemed! so much had happened since then—so he spoke of it now, a suppressed awe in his voice, the more impressive since it was not in his nature to be afraid of many things. Perhaps, mingled with the awe, there was a note of longing, for, adventurer as he was, careless of most things as he doubtless was, O'Ryan had a vein of sentiment in his composition. Bridget was somewhere behind those walls, and although he had used her to point a moral to me with regard to Princess Daria, I felt that his tirade against women generally did not apply to Bridget.

Certainly a brave man might fear to hazard an attack upon such a stronghold as Yadasara. Between our encampment and the city ran a broad

river, full of strange and unexpected currents, and of immense depth, so O'Ryan told me. It formed a natural line of demarcation across the country, and since the civil war had broken out; the crossing of the river by either party had been the signal for hasty warlike activity in the ranks of the other party. The city lay obliquely to the river in the form of a rough triangle, the city gates, as I afterwards found, being situated at the angles at the base of this triangle, and the city rose from this base gradually towards the huge rock which formed the apex of the triangle. It was not a uniform rise, the lower part of the city being built upon the level of the plain, the upper part—that is to say, the part nearest the river—rising suddenly upon the spurred base of the rock. This rock, which was the only part of the city which actually touched the river, rose sheer out of the water for at least six hundred feet, with hardly a bird's foothold upon it. It was the dominant feature, towering above the highest part of the city, presenting a problem as to how access was obtained to the fortress crowning the summit. It was a problem I was destined to solve later. The fortress seemed to be cut out of the solid rock. It was almost impossible to tell where Nature's masonry ended and where man's began. A tower here, hardly discernible from a jagged point of rock, might almost have been the work of some lightning-stroke, while a sudden upheaval in the rock itself might have poised that battlemented wall over the river six hundred feet below.

For several days we encamped idly before Yadasara. The enemy had recrossed the river, by means of a bridge of boats, nearly two miles higher up the

stream, but we made no attempt to follow them. I was doubtful if they had ever crossed it in great force. As far as one could judge there was no excitement in the city. They watched us from the walls, and sometimes we saw knights and men-at-arms on the opposite bank of the river, but for all the real notice they took of us we might not have existed.

I spoke to Walen about it.

"If we are not to attack the city, why are we here?" I asked.

"The enemy have retreated; probably the Count thinks that victory enough."

"I do not wonder that the war has been such a long one if it has been carried out in this way."

"No wonder you are impatient, my dear Verrall; so am I, but then Vasca commands. It is not without a certain pleasure that I see his comparative failure. Her Highness may next time entrust her forces to abler hands."

I could not mistake his meaning. I could not afford to underplay my part.

"It shall be no laggard's campaign then, I promise you, Sir Walen," I answered.

That night I could not sleep. It might, perhaps, have been Walen's words, which surely were significant enough to keep me wakeful; but, truth to tell, I think the disturbing element was of a fairer nature—the one danger I had left behind according to O'Ryan. After tossing about for a long time, I rose softly, not to awake O'Ryan, and stole out of the tent. The camp was still save for the soft tread of a sentry here and there, and the night was still, vast, and silent. There was no moon, but countless stars

hung as though invisibly suspended from the dark vault of heaven. Their reflection quivered in the deep waters of the river, and I could see dimly the great rock standing grim in the darkness and the silence. I went slowly between the tents, thinking not of civilization—I seemed to have left that never to return—but of a woman, a Princess. Civilization, with all that it meant to me—home, friends—was just then unregretted, forgotten, but that this woman had not smiled upon me, when I felt that I had done so much to earn that smile, sorely troubled me. I was not the first man who had hungered for such a little thing as a woman's smile, who has been ready to give the whole world for it; but surely no man has, in our day, stood in a mediæval camp, and longed for the smile of a Princess unknown to history. I smiled at the thought, and then I started.

The sound was indefinite, but there was a sound behind me. I turned to peer into the darkness, for it was almost black among the tents, although overhead it was clear and looked light. I was standing at the very outer line of the camp, within a few yards of the river. My ears had grown accustomed to the low swirl of the water; that was not the sound which had disturbed me.

I stepped back quietly into the darker shadow of a tent and listened. There was no mistaking the sound now—stealthy, hurrying feet, and the next moment two figures hurried past me towards the river and disappeared over the bank. I opened my mouth to give the alarm as I heard the first dip of an oar, but before I could cry out a third figure was at my side.

It was Count Vasca.

“Is it treachery?” he whispered.

I pointed to the river, where the dim outline of a boat was just discernible as it crept into the shadow of the great rock.

“I heard the sound of footsteps, and followed,” he said. “How came you here?”

“I could not sleep.”

He was silent for a moment.

“Better let them think they have got away undiscovered. I will at once have a sentry placed here. We will not give the alarm to-night. Let’s to bed, Sir Verrall. This means action at last.”

“When?” I asked.

“Soon, surely, since they take to spying upon us. You grow impatient. I would that I could trust all as I trust you. There are white-livered knights among us, Sir Verrall, or we had made more progress.”

He left me at my tent, and with a good-night, went on towards his own.

His frankness did not deceive me. He had had to make an effort to appear natural, and his story of white-livered knights sounded like a subterfuge.

O’Ryan’s snoring broke the silence of the night at regular intervals.

I shook him sharply.

“For a soldier you sleep too heavily.”

He sat up at once as though to give the lie to my words.

“What is it?”

“Quietly,” I said. “An adventure. I have aroused you to interpret the meaning of it.”

I told him what had happened, and repeated the Count’s words.

"There has always been a sentry by the river," he said thoughtfully.

"There was not to-night."

"And Vasca did not remark it?"

"Only to say he would have one placed there."

"That looks ugly. Perhaps he knew who the fugitives were, and had made arrangements for their easy escape."

"Ay—and was so anxious about them that he followed to make certain that they got away safely," I said. "Our thoughts jump in the same direction, O'Ryan."

"We must keep close together, Verrall, fighting or not. Lie down and sleep. I'll watch. We'll not both sleep at the same time again."

"I'll lie down, but sleep—I don't feel like sleeping."

"Perhaps, after all, sleeplessness was Vasca's only crime," said O'Ryan.

I laughed shortly.

"The stars may have tempted him to roam and think."

"Of what? Of whom?"

"I'm not the man's keeper nor his confessor, but other men love, Verrall, as well as you, and some of the biggest blackguards have been the most sentimental of lovers."

"To hear you rail at love one would think you had never loved."

"Bah, man! only a fool would argue so. How can a man rail at a thing he has never experienced? Get to sleep, Verrall, for the stars are paling."

CHAPTER X.**THE FIGHT AT THE BRIDGE.**

IN one respect at least Vasca had prophesied truly last night. Quite early in the morning it was evident that the day was not to be an idle one. Troops of men moved along the opposite bank of the river towards the bridge of boats two miles up the stream, a bridge which had been constantly defended, and which we had never attempted to force. This course of action may have been by the express command of the Princess; but, at least, it was a strange one. To march in the rear of a retreating enemy until they had withdrawn into their own borders, without attempting to punish them for the invasion, seemed excessively puerile to me. Then, of course, I was not a soldier by trade, only one by force of circumstances. The conduct of our foes struck me as no less curious. It appeared as if neither side wanted an engagement. They made no attempt to drive us off, yet, had they attacked us in full force, I doubt if we should have been able to successfully resist them.

Some thought of this kind was evidently in Vasca's mind when he saw the enemy in motion.

"They have made up their minds at last," he said to us who were with him. "We must prevent their

crossing the river. We are rather the defending than the attacking party, now."

Even as he spoke, several arrows shot quivering into the ground close to us. A company of archers stationed on the opposite bank of the river had begun to discharge their long shafts into the camp.

"They will not hurt us much from there," he said with a smile.

Let me give credit even to one who was my bitter enemy. Count Vasca was the soldier and commander in a moment. His orders were given sharply and decisively, nothing half-hearted about them, and I believe all personal feeling against me was forgotten just then. Still, I was not displeased that he should remain to defend the camp, while I was among those sent to defend the bridge. I said as much to O'Ryan.

"We get the post of honor, I'm thinking," he said, with a grim smile. "There'll be less fighting here than yonder."

"Better a foe in front than a false friend at your heels."

"Very true, Sir Verrall; yet we'll fight side by side as long as possible."

"A danger is removed for the present, at any rate."

"Maybe, but he has friends," answered O'Ryan. "While he has such friends, he will never strike even a cowardly blow himself. He hasn't the courage to be a thorough scoundrel."

I cannot say that danger of this kind unnerved me at all, but at the same time I cannot conscientiously state that I looked forward with any degree of pleasure to the part I was to take in defending the bridge. O'Ryan's intimation that it was likely to be

hot work had nothing to do with my feelings. There was nothing of the coward or the craven about me. I had already proved that to my own satisfaction—for no man knows whether he has courage or not until he has been put to the test—and, I believe, to the satisfaction of those about me; but, be it remembered, I was newly born into these lawless times.

I had truly fought one desperate battle, but it was a mimic one. No man's death lay at my door. Had I been a soldier, such thoughts would probably not have troubled me, but until lately I was a civilian in a peaceful civilization, and the consciousness of my coat of mail, and the clanking sound of spur and ringing steel, had not as yet made me madly anxious to stain my blade with the blood of a man who might, since our foes had been recruited from all nations, be one of my own countrymen. I gave no tongue to these thoughts. Such introspective reasoning would not have appealed to O'Ryan. He would not have understood it, and would have quickly translated it into fear. Certainly no one else would understand it. O'Ryan was the only one of my acquaintances in Drussenland who had ever touched modern civilization.

From what standpoint he had originally started, whether he ever had been a very law-abiding citizen or not I do not know; but, at any rate, he had now become a deep-oathed soldier of barbarous times, and the blood of a man lay as lightly on his conscience as the stain of it did upon his hands. A little water would cleanse his hands, and it required not even so much as a flagon of wine to drown any small whisper conscience might utter.

So we rode towards the bridge a goodly company,

the morning sunlight flashing back from polished helmet and armor. At intervals a jest gave birth to laughter, or a deep oath was growled out from the hoarse throat of a warrior who thought no more of coming battle than he did of taking his dinner. He had been trained to look upon fighting and feeding as the two chief items of his life. It was indeed hard to believe that we were going forward to deadly work. For deadly work it proved to be—short, but sharp and fierce while it lasted.

The enemy reached the bridge before us, and although our archers poured black flights of swift arrows upon them, we could not prevent them crossing, and they dashed upon us on our side of the river.

“Sit tight, and remember that you wear armor,” was O’Ryan’s last piece of advice to me.

It was good counsel. Unused to a coat of mail one is apt to forget it, and make desperate defence where little defence is needed.

By Heaven! Given courage it is easy to be a soldier when the moment comes, easy to taste the lust for victory which, in plain words, is the lust to slay your enemy. The first stroke which brought the ringing music from my blade killed in a moment all the introspective thoughts which had troubled me. In imagination I had lightly struck a foe rather than kill him; in reality I struck with all the power my muscles were capable of. And my strength was great, else had I not withstood Vasca at the tournament. There was a glory in feeling it now.

It was an equal fight, bravely waged. Many of my comrades I saw smitten from their saddles, even as many a foeman fell, some to rise and stagger to refuge or another horse, some to lie motionless while

the victors trampled over them. Yet I still was safe, my sword swinging heavily to right and left, now stayed by a strong arm, now crashing downwards, a foeman falling under its bite. Who fell beside me I did not know, but Walen and O'Ryan were close to me dealing out punishment to all within the sweep of their weapons. They were gallant fighters both, I was glad to be in their company. My sword swung down again upon an enemy, and a cry of exultation burst from my lips as I felt his armor split beneath the stroke, and for a moment saw the crimson stain the steel's brightness. The lust of battle was upon me. Now, as I soberly write of it, I am almost ashamed; but let the truth out. Just then I would have been nowhere else in all the great wide world. It was riotous pleasure to feel the blade cut inwards. The horse reared and plunged and its rider dropped in a heap downwards. I jerked my arm to free my weapon, but the body twisted somehow and my blade snapped in twain.

"A sword!" I cried, as I flung mine down, and reached towards one held up to me. Although my horse swerved at that moment, I caught the new weapon, but not securely in my grip, and even as I heard a warning cry behind me, a new foe attacked me fiercely. I had seen him afar off in the battle towering above his comrades, a veritable giant. His sword flashed the sunlight a good foot higher in the air than those about him, and like a sickle into ripe wheat reaped a space around him. Now it flashed above me, and I was unprepared. Only a feeble grip had I of my own weapon, and scarce could I stay his first tremendous stroke. I could see that Walen was straining his utmost to reach me, seeing my difficulty,

doubtless; but he was hemmed in, pressed on either side. Much had he to do to keep his own saddle, without helping me keep mine. I felt that the decisive moment of the fight had come. One side or the other must quickly yield, and I struggled mightily to get firm hold of my sword. It seemed to turn and slip in my mailed hand. A second stroke from my enemy fell upon me, breaking down my guard, and yet I stayed its fury. It glanced from my armor, and I clutched at my sword desperately. The man was a giant, but his movements were quick. Perhaps he saw how I was placed, and was savage that his victory had not been more easily accomplished. It maddened me to think that I could not meet him fairly. I cursed the weapon in my hand; it must have been loose at the hilt. I cursed the man who, falling, had snapped my own. My teeth were clenched in impotent rage.

The fury of our combat, or I should say, rather, his—for I had only been able to defend myself, and had no chance of striking a good blow in return—had cleared a space about us. My sword twisted in my grasp as he came upon me again. I could have flung it down in my mad fury, and given up the fight. But he saved me from that folly. He struck, and my sword was wrenched from me altogether. For one moment I saw it flying through the air, and I thought that the end had come. We were side by side, our horses seemed to be locked together. I heard him grunt in savage satisfaction as he raised himself in his stirrups to strike again, and give me my quietus. But as he rose so did I, and swinging my arm, I almost flung myself from the saddle as, with all the strength I had, I struck his head with my clenched

mailed fist. It was a good blow. I felt his head jerk, as a bone clicks in its socket, and, giant as he was, he reeled in his saddle, his sword falling lightly and harmlessly across me. At least we were on equal terms now. But no, the blow had done its work, striking in his helmet, it may be, for as the horse plunged the rider rolled to the ground, and lay there.

“Well struck, Sir Verrall!”

Walen was beside me. A new sword was in my hand, this time held in a grip of iron, but there was little work for it to do. Almost before we realized the fact the enemy were making for the bridge.

We were not concerned with following them nor intercepting them; others were doing that, and now that the fight was over it was pleasant to drop my arm to my side. It ached greatly.

“Are we never to cross the river?” I asked. “Of what use is a victory unless we follow it up?”

“I have given up trying to read that riddle,” Walen answered.

“Haven’t we men enough?”

“Perhaps not—indeed, I think not; yet I find no answer in the fact. Why have we not men enough?”

“What will happen, then?”

Walen shook his head.

“Probably we shall return and be feted as though we had done great deeds.”

“And we have done nothing. If Her Highness——”

“She, after all, is a woman, Sir Verrall,” he said. “What should she know of war?”

“A woman, maybe,” I answered rather hotly, “but at heart a warrior, I warrant you.”

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It angered me somewhat to hear the fact of the Princess being a woman thrown, as it were, in her teeth. First of all O'Ryan doubting her faithfulness because she was a woman; could anything be more full of folly, since women in faith put men to the blush? Now Walen doubting her courage—surely as great a folly, for the world has sung the praises of brave women in every age. Yet, although such doubting on the part of my comrades angered me, I found little consolation when I thought about Princess Daria. How would she receive me on my return? I had gained fresh distinction. The news of my prowess at the bridge preceded me, and Vasca spoke of it when I returned to the camp; yet how would this please the Princess? Surely in my combat with the Count I had proved myself a man, yet had she been displeased. Why? Why? And like a monotonous chant came the answer of O'Ryan's philosophy—because she is a woman. Had I understood women better I might have been less a fool.

Walen's conjecture proved to be correct. The next day the camp was struck, and we were returning, almost like retreating, as O'Ryan put it.

"It's hard, after such a fight, that we should gain nothing by it," he said, "although, for my own part, it pleases me well enough."

"You are more easily satisfied than I am."

"Probably in this matter. We are very differently placed."

"How so?"

"Doesn't it occur to you that I have been fighting against my former friends and comrades?"

"Well, what of it? You are in the service of the

Princess now, with sure promotion before you. What more would you have?"

"A little better knowledge of the future, Sir Ver-rall. There is too much jealousy surrounding the Princess. We had not been going back now were it not so. I say again, we might be in retreat were it not for those poor devils of prisoners. They bespeak us conquerors, but where is the honor in a few prisoners?"

"Will they be——"

And then I paused.

"Spitted in the market-place? Of a certainty they will."

I was thoughtful. These prisoners troubled me.

"The fact is, that if we are ever to get out of this infernal country, we are more likely to do it from Yadasara," O'Ryan went on, after a pause. "It is my hope to get back there, and when I do, to command the same honor as when I left. I shall have a story to tell which must vary to suit circumstances. I doubt if it will be the whole truth, but they know me and will believe it."

I laughed.

"The standard of honor is not too high in Yadasara," he said. "And when I go back you will be with me to prove what I say. Had I had only myself to think of, I should have made a dash to ride over the bridge with the men in retreat, yesterday."

"That is a dangerous confession, my friend," I said.

"My honesty in making it is a guarantee to you. We have become comrades, and comrades we shall remain. I ask nothing better than to escape with you, or, failing that, to fall with you. Still, I do not

want to do much fighting against the men who will have to listen to my story. That would be a matter against me."

"Do you think you were recognized in the fight?" I asked.

"By one man, yes, perhaps by others; but I know I was by one man."

"Well?"

He looked at me and slightly elevated his eyebrows. For a moment I mentally accused him of barbarity. Then I remembered how I had myself fought yesterday.

"Love prompts strange actions, Sir Verrall," he said slowly. "So does war. I struck a little harder, that was all. Care for my own safety gave me a little more strength, and I had the curiosity to make certain that he did not rise again. He will tell no tales of me," and then after a pause he added, "at any rate, in this world."

CHAPTER XI

THE PRISONERS OF WAR.

THE prisoners troubled me. Had I had the opportunity, I would one night have cut their bonds and let them go free, but this I could not do. They were guarded too carefully, and I knew well with what sinister intentions. I spoke about the prisoners to Walen, and he did not sympathize with me at all. He was a good fellow, but, after all, a barbarian.

"They would do the same to any prisoners of our," he said.

"That doesn't make it a right or a merciful proceeding, does it?"

"Think not? Truly, Verrall, I think it settles matters very well. Besides, our priests read the law so."

The priests,—there was my difficulty. I had been accepted by them; it would be ill work offending them.

O'Ryan no doubt did sympathize with me. He had himself nearly come to such an end, but he gave me little encouragement.

"We've our own skins to think of," was his terse way of putting it.

"Curse our own skins! We've got to be men, and to let those men die without an effort to save them would be to act like curs."

"As you will, Sir Verrall; but you cannot alter a law—a kind of religious law as this is—in a moment. If the priests will listen to you, well and good, if not, then take my advice, and gracefully hold your peace."

"You're a good fighter, O'Ryan," I answered, "but in advice you're a failure."

"Listen to that for gratitude!" he returned. "A piece of the wisest counsel ever uttered, laughed at! We would not be here this minute had I not forcibly impressed the same advice upon you on a former occasion. Sure, it's deadly work interfering with other folks' religion."

I dare say his reasoning was good so far as it went, but still the prisoners troubled me. I remembered what short shrift the captives got on a former occasion, and as we approached the town I knew that if I was to do anything for them it must be done quickly.

There was great rejoicing in the town that day, and it was kept up far into the night. They were good fighters, these Drussenlanders, and they were good roisterers too. The wine-shops did a thriving trade—that is, if the liquor drunk was paid for. Perhaps it was given free to such brave defenders, or perhaps it was taken without for your leave or by your leave, since brave defenders, let loose, become sad bullies.

Even in the palace there was high revel, much feasting and drinking, some unfit jesting too. Still, these jests were not spoken in the hearing of the Princess, nor did a knight unsteadily approach her. Doubtless she knew that such things happened, but

she did not countenance them, although she could not altogether prevent them.

My fears as to her reception of me were, I am bound to admit, unfounded. She welcomed me as she welcomed others, neither more warmly nor less. It was better than I expected, though I should speak falsely were I to say I was satisfied. Yet what could I expect more! A lover is a fool, selfish if he be not satisfied, and I, like the soldier in the street who, let loose, becomes a bully, became somewhat of a roisterer and bully too. The Princess should understand that I cared no more for her than for any other woman. It was the spirit of the bully, a spirit which foolish men often descend to. It was easy to play the braggart. The tournament had lifted me into favor, the stories told of me in the field make me a hero. They were strange stories some of them, stories new to me; such tales as from a shred of truth develop into nothing short of a monumental lie. But to-night I did not deny them. Almost I persuaded myself that they told of no greater deeds than I had accomplished.

I had done great deeds, everybody would have it so. There was no talk now of my being a carpet knight, no sneer that evidence of my prowess was wanting. It was an honor to speak to me. They said so, these young coxcombs who had been inclined once to jeer at me; and they meant it, most of them, a little fear of me, perhaps, touching their extreme courtesy into activity. Heavens! Once give a man a reputation, and what can he not do amongst his fellows! And for the women! It is their privilege to laugh if they will when men dare not, but to me they were kind.

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A dozen lovers were ready to my hand. It needed but a glance, and—— Ah, this is playing the brag-gart indeed! I had despised such a man a hundred times before, and have since, a hundred times; but let honesty peep from the hole she too often hides in. If I tell of scenes in which I played a good part, why not of those in which I was a sorry fool, or worse, if you will? Let us see the back of the picture as well as the front. Character lies not only in the face.

There was one lover I chose. For sport I chose her partly, partly for revenge. The Lady Aldrida did not beckon me now. Of my own accord I went to her, and she drew her gown aside that I might sit by her.

“You honor me, Sir Verrall.”

“Nay, mistress, it is ever the lady who honoreth the knight when she accepts his company.”

“And once you swore that you were rough of speech, not given to paying compliments.”

She cast down her eyes as she said it. She looked beautiful, and I was in the mood to like her beauty, perhaps the more that the eyes of the Princess were upon me, and that Vasca was watching too. Report said he favored the Lady Aldrida, except when report spoke of him as a suitor for the hand of the Princess Daria.

“Said I so?” I asked, leaning towards her, until the scent of her hair was in my nostrils.

“Indeed you did.”

“You must have frowned then, sweet mistress, or I could not have been so ungallant. When you smile, the veriest churl could not help but say pretty things.”

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“Once it was said that could you use your sword as you used your tongue, you would be a great warrior; now——”

“And now?” I asked, touching the lace upon her sleeve in a sort of mute caress.

“Ah, Sir Verrall, you have proved yourself with your sword, yet I doubt if it can work greater damage than your tongue.”

“Each to its business,” I answered gaily. “The sword for the heart of a man, the tongue for the heart of a woman.”

“Any man or any woman?”

She looked up shyly. It is a sweet way in a pretty woman when it is well contrived.

“Nay, you wrong me; I vow it. The man must be a foe as surely as the woman one I love.”

In my soberer senses I would have plucked my tongue out before I had said that word to any woman but one. She bent her head and clasped her hands in her lap, an attitude that must have made any who noticed it marvel. She was rather for raillery than sentiment as a rule.

“Had you said so when you paid no compliments I might have believed you,” she whispered.

And I whispered just as low—

“Mistress, I will quarrel with you if you believe me not now.”

“Quarrel!” she said, with an anxious look, a little hand laid upon my arm.

“Then, believe.”

Had I been asked whether I was a master in the art of love, I should, without hesitation, have answered no. Yet to-night the gift was mine, unless the Lady Aldrida was an easy prey. Perish the

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thought! A hundred had bowed before her, yet she stood heart-whole. It was my own victory; success, where others had failed.

And deeper yet I dived, blindfold, as it were.

"Mistress, if you would, prove my faith."

She looked up suddenly, interrupting me.

"May I?"

"How and when you will," I answered.

"Not now," she laughed. "I have no quest to set you to, no enemy who has slandered me, to point out."

"Well for him," I boasted, "for I am dangerous when you smile upon me. Still, mistress, there is one question I would ask."

"And I will answer it if I can."

"Your other lovers, have you forgotten them?"

"Sir Verrall!"

For a moment I think she fancied I had been playing with her. Nothing was further from my mind just then.

"Pardon, mistress, but a lover is a jealous fellow. He must walk alone in his lady's garden, or walk not there at all. And beauty cannot hide itself. I have seen many a gallant waiting for one smile from you, therefore I ask the question."

"My lovers they may be, but no heart-chord of mine have they touched. Perchance I smiled, my lord. Would you always have me frowning?"

"Nay, mistress, but there are smiles which only I should have. I pray you smile not so upon them."

"Not on one, my lord, I promise you."

"Not even on——?"

"On whom?"

“On Count Vasco. He surely loves you, and he is a valiant knight.”

“Loves me! Perhaps once he did, but now it is the Princess he would win a gracious word from.”

For a moment I almost recovered my senses, as I followed her glance to where Vasca stood beside the Princess, but my companion’s next words made me a fool again.

“Valiant, you say, yet I know one more valiant than he. My heart leapt towards you as Count Vasca rolled to earth that day.”

“I have had greater affairs to settle than that, mistress,” and, fool as I was, I almost blushed to think how far truth had retreated from me.

“When I seek to prove you it shall be a hard task then,” she whispered. And then she stood up suddenly. “There is music in the lower room. My feet long to dance, since my heart is light. Will you take me?”

I believe I would have married her there and then had she asked, so great a fool was I. I felt proud and happy that she leaned upon my arm as I passed down the room, thinking myself a fine fellow. I had learned the trick of it. A good sword and a persuasive tongue. No marvel that I was a hero. Could there have been an echo to that thought, I fancy it would have whispered back, “What a marvel that you can be such a fool!”

The Lady Aldrida danced gracefully, and I do not think I disgraced her as a partner. I did my best to please, for I was glad to lead her through the dance. She was a beautiful woman—there was no gainsaying that; and is there a man who does not feel elated when he knows that other men are watch-

ing him, and would willing be in his place? The envy of others is a sure reason for being contented with oneself.

The dance over, I pledged her in wine, sealing, as it were, the words I had spoken, and she blushed a sweet acceptance of my homage.

“Has never Vasca pledged you so?” I asked.

“I hope not, or yours would be a false pledge, seeing that he seeks my company no longer.”

“Truly a fool to forsake such favors.”

“Yet he does so for the favors of a Princess,” she said, in a low voice. “Tell me, not as you see with a lover’s eyes, but critically—on your honor, critically—am I not as fair as she?”

“Nay, mistress, you judge yourself but harshly,” I answered promptly.

Her pleasure at my compliment gave her a triumphant look, and in such a look there is always something to make one feel a victim. It is good to tell a woman that you are her slave, but there is little pleasure in knowing that a woman believes you are so. It was not a wise light that the Lady Aldrida allowed to gleam in her eyes just then, for it bid me regret the words I had that moment uttered, and with them many I had spoken before. I had, indeed, set out to show the Princess Daria that I was independent of her goodwill, but I had not meant to name a woman whom I preferred to her. Conscience smote me for such a falsehood as this, even through the thick armor of my folly.

Perhaps for this reason I began to hear what others around us were talking of. Until now I had been deaf to all save Lady Aldrida.

“To-morrow in the market-place,” were the first

words I caught. They were uttered by a man seated a little space from us, spoken to his companion, a woman, and I could well guess of what he spoke.

"To-morrow!" she said. "Is it not a cruel law?"

I blessed her for that kindly question.

"Cruel?—yes; but necessity is often cruel," her companion answered. "To let them go would be madness, to spare them would be to gather enemies within our walls. Speak no more of them—they are not worth the exercise of your sweet lips."

"Pardon me, Sir Knight," I said, turning to him. "Is it of the prisoners you speak?"

"Yes, Sir Verrall. They die to-morrow."

"Prisoners of war always die on the morrow," said Lady Aldrida. "What are they to us?"

"It is a barbarous custom—disgraceful to brave men."

"Still, it is the law."

"Then there should be no such law."

She shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"We cannot alter it—why let it trouble us?"

I laid my hand gently on her arm.

"Were you women of Drussenland to set your face against such a law, the law would be changed. What, think you, is the last thought of a brave knight as he puts spurs into his horse and rushes to the combat—what but the thought of her he loves? If, when he returns victorious, she should turn her back upon him so long as he clamored for the death of his victims—a revenge unworthy of a brave man—think you the law would stand? Women's frowns, dear mistress, would kill it."

"What would you, Sir Verrall?" she asked, rising with some excitement.

"I would do something for these same prisoners of ours."

"To-night?"

"Surely, since they die to-morrow."

She looked straight into my eyes. What she saw there I know not, but she put her hand in mine suddenly.

"I will do what you will."

"Then let us to the Princess."

"Blame me not if we fail," she said. "The Princess does not over-favor me at present."

"I have an argument to make her attentive to a petition," I answered. "A dangerous one to use, perchance; but this is no time to count the cost."

Had I known how dangerous it was, I might have thought again before using it.

We went together. I knew that for my sake she went, and for that I honored her. If there were attendant reasons clothed in self, how could I know of them? I had no deep knowledge of a woman's heart, and even he with the deepest knowledge reads seldom all that is written there, either of good or ill. My wider learning has taught me so.

Count Vasca was still with the Princess, and Jasar stood close beside her chair. As we approached, I saw that we had come at an inopportune time. Vasca's brow was clouded—that I did not fear—but the Princess was evidently angered. She moved impatiently, and though I could not hear her words, I could guess they were petulant.

"You come too late to give us counsel, Sir Ver-rall," she said angrily. "Think you there is nothing besides feasting to be done?"

"Your Highness must pardon me, but I thought

to-night was given to feasting. The noisy town bid me think so, and——”

“Is it aught to me what the rabble of the town do?” she interrupted.

“And here was dancing and making merry. Your Highness did not call me to counsel.”

“It seems, Sir Verrall, that you please yourself, and come when I do not call.”

“To ask a favor, Princess.”

“Favors are easily asked,” she returned, in a tone that showed she was prepared to refuse me.

“It is a favor, yet not for myself.”

“For the Lady Aldrida, doubtless, since she comes with you. You chose a fitting knight to do your wishes, madam, yet not one who cannot be refused.”

She spoke in a sneering fashion which made me lose some of the calmness I had intended using. The cloud on Vasca’s brow lifted, too. He was pleased that the Princess received me so ungraciously.

“The favor is not for Lady Aldrida. She would doubtless have been received kindly had she brought any request of her own to you. Your Highness knows that we have returned from victory.”

“I have given my thanks to all who helped to win it,” she answered sharply.

“Most graciously,” I returned. “A victory brings suffering with it. I speak not of those who fall fighting, be they friends or foes, but of the prisoners we bring with us. Is it well that because they have been brave they should die like dogs in the marketplace?”

I saw that Jasar was looking at me fixedly. I saw a deeper cloud than ever settle over Vasca’s face.

“This lady would plead with me for their pardon.

Is it not right that women, with their gentler nature, should teach us men, brought up in ruder manners, something of their gentleness?"

"I do plead with Sir Verrall," said Lady Aldrida.

"This mood is a strange one to catch you in, my Lady," said Vasca.

"That Lady Aldrida pleads has no weight with me," said the Princess sternly. "Think you, Sir Verrall, it was I who made the laws of Drussenland? Is my word to alter laws burnt into the very hearts of the people because, forsooth, a knight makes a request?"

"Then, your Highness, pardon me; to the Princess I will not appeal, but to the woman."

"As you have already appealed to Lady Aldrida, I am not so easily urged."

Still Jasar looked fixedly at me, yet I could read no meaning in his eyes.

"Would you starve those who fight for us to feed the traitors who fight against us?" asked Vasca, with a sneer, as he saw that the Princess was unlikely to grant my request.

"I would prevent butchery in cold blood, Count, though my own life should pay the forfeit."

But my courage did not appeal to her Highness.

"Your words savor somewhat of treachery, Sir Verrall," she said. "You are so gently inclined towards my enemies, it is hard to believe that you can be equally gentle to my friends."

She could hardly have spoken words to sting me more. Many eyes were fixed upon me now, and I knew that I was likely to be disgraced. Her words made my blood tingle; Vasca's cold smile maddened me.

"My deeds have proved me," I answered haughtily. "If further proof is wanting, let him who questions my loyalty speak."

I paused. There was no answer to my hot challenge.

"Then only your Highness doubts me."

She rose hastily from her chair.

"I have not called in question your deeds in the field, Sir Verrall. Let me not have to question your deeds in my presence. The law must take its course. I have no power to grant your request," and she turned to retire.

I was desperate. Her curt refusal was my disgrace, I saw it in the faces of those about me. I would not let her go thus. I told myself I was fighting for the prisoners, but I was fighting for myself, too.

"One deed done in your presence has gone unrewarded, Your Highness," I said, taking a step towards her.

She stopped, and turned to me.

"The call to arms robbed me of the victor's crown. It is ever held that he who conquers in the lists should claim a favor of the lady whose token he wears."

"The lady will no doubt grant it, unless your rashness has made her afraid," she said scornfully, looking at Lady Aldrida.

From my bosom I plucked the handkerchief the Princess had given me, and fell upon my knee.

"Then, gracious lady, I claim my favor—the lives of these prisoners of war."

CHAPTER XII

BANISHED

I HAD put everything upon the hazard of a die, and, kneeling, I awaited the result. There was absolute silence—it seemed to me for a long time—and I could feel that the chamber was charged with an atmosphere of expectancy. At such a moment one takes in many things at a glance. Count Vasca was furious. I could hear the hiss of his breath, almost expected him to speak and curse me, yet he held his peace. I saw a curious smile wrinkle the corners of Jasar's mouth, and although I did not understand its meaning, there was in it something which encouraged me. I was conscious that Lady Aldrida stepped back from me, a movement that indeed suggested fear at my rashness.

I saw the Princess start, and then the color dyed her cheeks deeply, but there was no encouragement in her face. For one moment it seemed as if she remembered the giving of the handkerchief; but the next she was stern, resolute, and I might have been some poor devil craving mercy for myself. Her eyes flashed dangerously, her mouth tightened hard and unforgivingly, her bosom rose and fell in quick movement, telling of a passionate anger which she held in check. She looked superb, but less a woman than I had ever seen her look. Just then she would have

inspired fear, but hardly love, I think. My sudden action seemed to have put the key of the situation into my hand for the moment, but her dignity and self-possession snatched it from me. Then she spoke clearly, calmly.

“A token must be given to make it of any worth. This handkerchief, as we remember, was merely forgotten when, as a stranger among us, we gave you a word of sympathy. Had we known the use you intended to put it to, we should have sent a servant to reclaim it. Never has any subject received a token of ours. You forget yourself, Sir Verrall, and in future we shall know how to treat you. It were well to absent yourself from our presence until we have forgotten the insult.”

Then, turning to one of her women, she commanded her to take the handkerchief. Those about me bowed low, as the Princess passed from the room followed by her attendants.

Not until the curtains had fallen behind her did I rise from my knee. It was not homage which kept me there—I wanted a moment to think. I can honestly say that at that time it never occurred to me that I had brought this disgrace upon myself. I felt the sting of it, and I understood the danger, but I believed myself something of a martyr for the cause of humanity. I had done the wretched prisoners no good, but I had made the attempt, and since it had failed, I should have more enemies in Drussenland than I had ever had before. I knew this as I rose to my feet.

Jasar had gone. Vasca was leaving the apartment hurriedly, and those standing near me drew back as I crossed the room.

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At the entrance Lady Aldrida stopped me.

"We attempted the impossible, Sir Verrall. I warned you that I was in no great favor with her Highness."

"We have done what we could," I answered. "Take heed to yourself, Lady Aldrida. It is ill policy to sympathize with a fallen and disgraced man."

"That man is my——"

"Is a fool, my lady," I interrupted. "I am in no mood for talking of it now."

She dropped me a low curtsey, and I went quickly through the other rooms, neither being spoken to nor speaking to any.

As I was leaving the palace, however, a hand was laid upon my shoulder, and I turned to face a friend, a knight who had ever taken part with me against my enemies.

"Sir Verrall, let me come with you."

"I warn you I am poor company to-night," I answered.

"Two swords are better than one when the night is dark and the attack sudden and from behind."

"Why should you fear attack to-night?"

"The town is full of drunken soldiers, and a fallen man is food for any assassin's dagger. The murderer may be thanked for getting rid of so turbulent a subject—or thinks he may."

"Has my disgrace been cried in the streets so soon?"

"There are those who would be eager to spread the news, Sir Verrall, perhaps even willing to pay some drunkard for his crime."

I laughed at his sombre foreboding, but I was not ill-pleased to have his company. His presence may

have protected me, I do not know, but I reached my quarters in safety.

O’Ryan was not there. I guessed that the attractions of the town had proved too much for him to-night, and I was not sorry to be alone. I crossed the room, and looked out upon the market-place. The sounds of merry-making run to riot rose up to me, lights passed here and there, and at intervals there were harsher cries, as drunken men quarrelled and were separated by their companions. I heard and saw only as in a dream, for my imagination was painting me a picture of what the dawn would bring—the chanting priests, the flashing swords, and the stakes with their ghastly burdens. What could I do more to prevent the butchery? Nothing; absolutely nothing. I had played my trump card and lost. Not only had I not helped the prisoners, but I had put my own life in jeopardy. I had no mercy to hope for from the Princess, and I could not expect the priests to raise a finger in my protection now that I had attempted to wreck one of their dearest laws. Some men, I suppose, having realized that they are powerless to act, are able to sit still and passively await events, but to feel helpless maddened me. I paced up and down the room, giving the very wildest ideas consideration. Should I go to the priests, and, playing upon their superstition, command them to save their prisoners? Should I steal out, mount my horse, ride to Yadasara, and proffer my services to lead the king’s troops to victory against their enemies? Should I go back to the palace and attempt to speak again with the Princess? And then, I regret to say, I wondered if the lives of these prisoners were worth the sacrifice I had made for them, whether I should not

have been wiser to take O’Ryan’s advice and look after my own skin.

Presently I realized that the town had grown quieter. I had lost count of time, and could not tell how long I had been alone. I listened for O’Ryan’s coming in vain, and I smiled as I remembered there would be little need to listen very intently for that. He was hardly likely to restrain himself when so much liquor was flowing, and would presently come back unsteadily enough, roaring out a song.

Listening for O’Ryan, however, I heard something else—stealthy footsteps coming along the corridor. Under the circumstances it was not strange that I should think of treachery. I drew my sword noiselessly and waited. There was a quick knock at my door.

“Who comes at so late an hour?” I said, throwing the door open, and ready to defend myself.

“Welcome you all your friends so, Sir Verrall?”

It was Jasar, and he smiled as he pointed to my drawn sword.

“I expected a foe.”

“And perhaps with reason,” he said. “Still, I come as a friend, and secretly. Close the door and make it fast, and let us speak low.”

“These walls look solid enough,” I said, as I closed the door.

“Stone walls are deceptive. It is my business to know that, Sir Verrall. Your servant has not returned?”

“No.”

“And will not to-night. He was found brawling in the streets, and was arrested.”

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"I thought soldiers were privileged to brawl to-night," I said.

"Some, not all."

"You mean that only my servant was arrested."

He bowed, and watched me with a smile upon his face, even as he had watched me as I pleaded to the Princess.

"By Vasca's orders, doubtless?"

"Doubtless."

"Ah, for a few moments with him to settle our score now, and for all time!" I said impatiently.

"What can you expect? A fallen man is ever a stepping-stone which others use to rise to higher favor."

"Fallen, you say! It is too rash an assertion. Falling, perhaps, but not fallen. When Sir Verrall completely falls, he'll carry some ruin with him."

"Brave words—an idle boast I should have said had another uttered them. But Sir Verrall has proved himself as good as his words. Tell me, are all men as you are in the land you came from?"

"I am but a poor specimen of my countrymen," I answered; and then I stopped, remembering how I had come to Drussenland as the long-expected Knight.

"We must talk of that another time," he answered, with a smile. "Now we have other matters in hand. You are right, Sir Verrall; you have not fallen yet, but there are those who think you have."

"You mean——?" I began.

"Mark you, Sir Verrall, you were unwise to-night."

"To plead for those wretched prisoners?"

"No, for that I honor you. It was the action of

a true knight. The law is a disgrace. I quarrel not with your pleading, but with the manner of it."

"It was the only way."

"There you are in error," he answered. "First, you should have come alone. To associate Lady Aldrida with the request was to court failure. Then you should not have asked for an immediate answer. Her Highness cannot make and break laws at her pleasure. Your importunity made her resist you."

"Made her doubt my loyalty," I said bitterly. "Had a man so accused me, I would have cut out his lying tongue."

"You gave the challenge, Sir Verrall, and since none dared to answer it, you had the advantage. But you did not use it. You turned to sneer at the Princess. Think you any woman can bear that?"

"My knowledge of women is limited."

"True, I have found it so. You should learn to read women, Sir Verrall, and then you would know how to use your advantage. The Princess after all is a woman."

I looked at him, trying to discover a deep meaning in his words, but Jasar's face was not easy to read.

"I used the weapons to my hand," I said.

"And used them badly; your last weapon worst of all. It was bravely done, but it was madness just then."

"I am no courtier where the lives of men are at stake."

"When you should be the courtier most. Yet you do yourself an injustice. I marked you play the courtier well enough to the Lady Aldrida, and the Princess saw it also. I can read on the Lady Al-

drida's face what the man who whispers to her talks of. It is a most tell-tale face."

The priest looked hard at me, but I did not flinch. What was it to him or to any one what I whispered?

"I saw well that you talked of love."

"And if I did?"

"Was it wise, think you, to produce the Princess's token when you had proved how lightly you esteemed it?"

This was an argument I could not find a ready answer to without showing this priest, of whose friendship I had no guarantee, that I thought more of the Princess than I cared to acknowledge.

"She denied the gift," he went on. "She could truly do so, for I saw the manner in which it was given. You could expect nothing else but her anger and the banishment she pronounced."

"I have fought and lost, as many another man has done before me."

"You have not lost yet, Sir Verrall. I was to-night sent to the priests by her Highness. The sacrifice of the prisoners is delayed for the present."

"Thank Heaven!" I exclaimed.

"So far you have succeeded. It is possible—nay, probable—that the Princess will send for you. Be humble; it will serve you best. Of my coming here you must not speak."

"I thank you for coming."

"For the present the prisoners are safe; you may save them altogether, but in doing so you must be content to put yourself in danger. I know not how her Highness will treat you, whether she will forgive or no, but of this I warn you—if you save the prisoners, the priests will be your enemies. They are

powerful, more powerful even than Count Vasca to do you harm. I know you to be fearless, I believe you to be true; but mark well how you go after sunset. I am a priest, a man of peace, but I charge you have a ready hand for your sword."

"I drew it to welcome you," I answered.

"And one more thing, Sir Verrall—make not other enemies. A foe in steel or even in priestly robes may be met and conquered, but a woman—she has weapons that a man is ill-fitted to guard against. I seek no confidence, I only advise. Beware of the Lady Aldrida! There is a whole armory of danger in that fair woman."

"You wrong her; I dare swear that you wrong her."

She had stood by me; I could do no less than protect her.

"I have given my advice," he said calmly. "It is for you to use it or not as you will. Good-night! When I am gone make fast the door again. For you danger lurks in every shadow."

I opened the door for him.

"Good-night," and he raised his hand in a blessing. "At some other time we will talk of that country of yours. It should be a good land whose knights are fearless and true, and yet gentle as you are, Sir Verrall—a good land, indeed."

CHAPTER XIII

A SECRET INTERVIEW.

HAD I had less to think of, the priest's words might have struck me more. He was evidently anxious for my safety, but he was even more anxious to hear about my country.

I closed the door and fastened it, and stretched myself upon my couch, intending to keep awake. The walls around me might not be as solid as they looked; but I was weary. My nerves had been at high tension for hours, and Nature asserted herself.

Sunlight filled the room when I awoke, and my first thought was one of thankfulness that no tragedy was to be enacted in the square that morning. My next thought was of O'Ryan. That he had been arrested by Vasca's orders as an insult to me, I had no doubt; but I could see no way of avenging the insult at present. Still, it was necessary to find out that nothing further than the loss of his liberty for a day or two was to happen to O'Ryan, and having made my mind easy on this point, I felt that it would be wiser not to attempt to cross the Count in this matter. He had some show of reason for his action, and I could not prove that the Irishman did not deserve his fate.

Bearing the priest's warning in mind, I went out little during the next three days. I attended to my

duties in the camp, and visited the guard-room each morning, but did not linger to gossip with any of my comrades. It struck me that they were rather pleased than otherwise not to have to talk with me. A banished man is ever a dangerous companion. Even my best friends were not too eager to emphasize their friendship just then. It was on the third day that I met Count Vasca. He approached me in the most friendly manner.

"I came to your quarters yesterday, but could not find you," he said.

I did not believe him, for I had been there nearly all day, still I did not tell him so.

"I regret that I was obliged to have your man arrested the other night," he went on. "Most of the soldiers took a certain amount of license, but he strayed beyond the limits, and I was obliged to act as I did."

"He probably deserved it, Count. I understand he will be released to-day."

"I gave such orders this morning."

"He was the only brawler, I suppose?"

"By no means, Sir Verrall," he answered, with a laugh. "He was the only one I caught, and was therefore unfortunate enough to be made an example of."

"Poor fellow; most unfortunate. The men who are made examples of are seldom the worst of sinners. The mere fact that they are made the scapegoats is a kind of apology from those who judge them, isn't it?"

And then we both laughed, attempting to deceive each other. He did not succeed, but I fancy I did.

"You have my sympathy regarding the other

night, Sir Verrall," he went on. "Most of us know what it is to be temporarily under a cloud. You have heard, doubtless, that her Highness is wavering with regard to the prisoners?"

"I hear little since I am banished from the Court," I answered.

"I thought—— Still, it is no affair of mine, though, truth to tell, it touches me somewhat—would indeed have touched me sorely some while ago."

"Why hesitate to speak?" I said.

"I thought Lady Aldrida might have kept you informed of what was going forward."

"I have not seen her since that night, Sir Vasca; besides, is she not under as heavy a cloud as I am?"

"The selfsame cloud, Sir Verrall, but it will pass. Once I should have fretted to break a lance with you for the possession of so fair a lady, but now I know that she never thought too well of me. Believe me, the cloud will pass. You were unfortunate enough to offend her Highness somewhat, but I have some power with her, being her kinsman, and will speak for you and for the lady."

"You are generous, Count, but I would sooner plead my own cause."

"As you will. I offered as a friend."

"And I thank you in the same spirit as that in which the offer was made."

Whether he understood me or not, I cannot say. We parted as we had met, amicably, but I was conscious of having put a dangerous weapon in the Count's hands. To further his own ends, he would doubtless make the most of my feelings towards the Lady Aldrida when speaking of me to the Princess. For myself, I did not dare to look matters squarely

in the face. Much of what I had said to Lady Aldrida I remembered only hazily. Had I been madly her lover, too little had happened to make me confident, yet too much might have happened should the Lady Aldrida choose to look upon me as a future husband. As I did not dare to look matters in the face, so I could not bring myself to sit in judgment upon my own conduct. I was living from hour to hour; why plan out my future conduct when the occasion to act as I had planned might never arise?

That day O'Ryan returned, and, feeling that I owed him some explanation as to why I had not used every endeavor to release him, I told him of my banishment.

"The prisoners may live, but they'll be the death of us, Verrall, unless you're careful. I wasn't brawling the other night. For the life of me I could not make out why I was arrested, but now it is all explained. Once you are thoroughly out of favor, we may as well commit suicide to prevent a worse end."

"There is always Yadasara as refuge," I suggested.

"Aye, if we can get there, I ask nothing better; but we've got to get there, Verrall."

"I am playing for high stakes, O'Ryan. It's poor policy to be afraid of trifles."

"Life and death don't seem to me such trifles," he answered. "And as for the high stakes, what are they?"

"Men's lives."

"Men's lives! Bah! It's for the love of a woman, Verrall."

I laughed. I was in danger of having too much

of the love of a woman if Lady Aldrida were serious. I told nothing of her to O’Ryan.

“And, by Saint Patrick, she isn’t worth it,” he went on. “That’s where I quarrel with you. Granted that she has fine eyes, and is a grand figure of a woman on horseback; but there’s plenty such in the old country. Dublin swarms with them from one end of the town to the other; and if you’re partial that way, faith, you haven’t time to blink between the shocks beauty’ll be giving you. I sympathize, Verrall. I’ve a weakness for a pretty woman myself, but there’s a limit to the value of any one of them. You’ve only got one life, but there are plenty of women about. If you can’t get one, get another. You may take your oath that however beautiful a woman is, she’s got her equal knocking about somewhere.”

“Very likely,” I answered.

“Then let this Princess marry one of her own countrymen.”

“She probably will if she marries at all.”

“I wish she’d make haste about it, and put an end to the danger. I believe it’s a kind of a miracle I’m alive now.”

“You were drunk the other night, of course?”

“There’s no of course about it. I wasn’t brawling.”

“What were you doing when they arrested you?”

“Just walking along, singing a bit, swearing a bit at intervals, maybe, when the street wasn’t wide enough; but I wasn’t brawling, and I wasn’t half so drunk as all the other men I came across, no, nor as drunk as the fellows who arrested me. And what of

it? Wasn't everybody merry because of the victory? though for that matter we were fuller of wine than we ever were of victory. Can't see where the victory came in—seemed to me a darned retreat. Faith, if wine is so plentiful for such a small skirmish, what kind of a rejoicing will it be when we do win a great battle?"

"Ten days in prison instead of three, perhaps," I suggested.

"Confound it, Verrall, I'm not a boy out of school that you should play the master."

"Nor man enough to see a joke, eh, O'Ryan?"

"It's got beyond my powers of vision, let it be," and grumbling and growling, he attacked his victuals. They had not taken much trouble about his food in prison. But he had a strong stomach, and caught up those three days in an amazingly short space of time.

That evening the Princess sent for me. I had just concluded that my suspense was not to be relieved that day, when one of the Princess's guard came.

"Her Highness's orders, and will you follow me, Sir Verrall?"

It will be remembered that my quarters communicated with the Great Hall, and the palace lay on the other side. I had never entered the palace except by traversing the streets, and going in at the main entrance, but I had little doubt that there was another way. We crossed the Great Hall, which was in darkness, and went along many corridors with many turnings, so that I should have been quite unable to retrace my steps. Had any but one of the Princess's own guards summoned me, I should have

walked less fearlessly. I should have been an easy victim to a lurking foe, and there were shadows enough to hold a thousand such.

Presently we stopped, apparently in the middle of a corridor.

“A moment, Sir Verrall. I will inquire her Highness’s pleasure.”

He drew back a sliding door in the wall, entered a dimly-lighted apartment, and closed the door after him. Left in darkness, my hand went to my sword-hilt, though the weapon would have been of little use, since it was a dress bauble worn for show rather than for defence.

Only a minute or two elapsed before the door was opened again, and the man beckoned me.

I entered a small ante-room almost bare of furniture, and dimly lighted; but I had no time to take particular note of anything, for the guard immediately drew aside the curtains which hung over a door at the opposite end of the room, and I stood in a large apartment, and in the presence of the Princess.

She was half-reclining upon a couch, and had she studied the pose she could not have chosen one more attractive. Jasar was seated near her, and they were alone; but it seemed to me that others had been there recently, for the rugs on two or three couches in the room were askew as though the occupants had risen hastily. I wondered who had been with the Princess, for it was evident that I had been brought there secretly. The room was almost Oriental in tone, full of warmth and color, and there was a pleasant perfume in the air, possibly from some burning pastille.

The Princess moved slightly to indicate that she

was aware of my coming, and feeling rather insignificant before this beautiful woman, I approached, and fell on my knee before her.

"You have angered me extremely, Sir Verrall," she said, "and I know not whether I have acted rightly in sending for you now."

I felt rather relieved that she did use the regal plural. Personal anger, since she had sent for me, was preferable to state anger, so to speak. I began to feel a man again, but remembering Jasar's advice, I meant to be humble.

"I crave your pardon, your Highness, and ask for your goodwill again."

"You have my pardon. My goodwill you must deserve."

"Your Highness has only to command," I answered.

She bid me rise, and motioned me to be seated. I sat down a little removed from her.

"As I have forgiven, I will not speak of the other night. In your country courtesy may find a different expression to that which it has here in Drussenland. You are but a stranger amongst us, and have therefore, perchance, some excuse."

"Pardon, your Highness, but if I may claim any excuse, let me claim the one which prompted my hasty action."

"And that?"

"Your Highness expressed a doubt of my loyalty. Your words cut so deeply that I acted rashly."

She smiled.

"You acted rashly indeed; but that is forgiven. We will speak no more of it. The prisoners you pleaded for have not yet been put to death. Thus

far you have persuaded me, yet I know not how to act. As Princess, as the rightful Sovereign of Drussenland, I can only administer the law; as a woman, I can hate the law, and this, which demands the sacrifice of prisoners, is most hateful, cruel, and unjust. It wanted no stranger knight to tell me this."

"I have made my petition; I will urge you no more," I answered.

"Regretting that you have urged so much?" she asked.

"Nay, your Highness, but I have used all my weapons. I can now only bow to your decision."

"It had been better had you reserved your last weapon until now, Sir Verrall. As a woman, it might have had power to move me; it was powerless to move the Princess."

Then the handkerchief had been willingly left in my hand. I wondered what feelings had been behind the gift.

"I have sent for you secretly to-night. My women had retired before you came, and only Jasar and the guard have knowledge of your coming. You will not speak of it, either. Have you thought of the consequences to yourself if I save the lives of these prisoners?"

"I have, but I am not afraid."

"The priests clamor for the sacrifice. The people clamor for it. Even to-day our wise men prophesied calamity for us if the law is broken. For myself my person is sacred, but for you every step you take is one of danger. You have had many enemies, Sir Verrall, since first you came into Drussenland; but with the priests against you, and with the priests a great mass of the people, how think you you can

stand? In the streets are hundreds of men—aye, and women, too—who, at the priests' bidding, would think it a service to their God to strike you dead. For my councillor in this matter there will be no mercy."

"I have a religion, too, your Highness, and mercy is its very keystone. I were, indeed, false to my religion were I not to stand up for the lives of these prisoners; and as for the danger to myself, it counts for nothing."

She looked at me, I thought, with some admiration.

"Besides, these same priests have accepted me as the expected Knight. That should make my person sacred to them."

She laughed, a little silvery ripple of music.

"Even the expected Knight will not be allowed to break the laws of Drussenland with impunity," she said.

"But for their own sakes they cannot deny me now. It would rob the people of their belief in the priests."

"They will not deny you, but they will seek for means to correct their mistake without confusion to themselves."

"Your Highness, it would seem, has little faith in the priests," I said gravely.

"Sir Verrall, I have a spirit within me which cries out for something more than legend. Why I know not, except it be from the teaching of Jasar, who is called unorthodox, and would be in a sorry plight among his brethren had he not my protection."

"Your Highness speaks truly," said Jasar.

"May I not claim the same protection?" I asked.

"I am almost powerless to protect you. I know not how long I may have any power at all. There are those who love not a woman to rule, and that she breaks the laws may be an occasion to rise against her. It would be good to lay aside the golden circle that stamps me sovereign, and be as other women—always a woman, and never a Princess."

"That is not well said, your Highness," said Jasar. "You were born to rule, and your duty lies in ruling."

"Ah, let me forget that I am more than a woman if it pleases me," she said petulantly, and then she became calm again. "Yours was a strange coming amongst us."

She leaned her head upon her hand and looked fixedly at me.

"It was indeed strange," I answered.

"There is a reason in legend," she went on in a dreamy manner. "Legend is the surface meaning, perhaps, of the deeper truths which lie beneath. When the priests, speaking by their legends, proclaimed you the expected Knight, the saviour of this country of ours, they may have proclaimed a truth greater than they understood."

"I have thought that, your Highness," I answered.

"A country whose men are fearless, whose religion has the keystone of mercy—yes, it appeals to something within me that the laws of Drussenland do not appeal to. You must tell me of your country, but not now. The times demand the Princess, not the woman. To-morrow, Sir Verrall, I will command that the prisoners be released, let whatever danger come. To-morrow I will send for you, and see that you forget not to crave my pardon publicly, even as,

publicly, you angered me. To-night has satisfied the woman; to-morrow, satisfy the Princess."

I fell upon my knee. I did it to the woman, not to the Princess, though she did not know it—or I think not.

"You say you are almost powerless to protect me, but I am not powerless to protect you. In your danger claim me; I have a life to give. It is yours when you claim it."

"Loyal; I believe you," she answered. "As your Princess, I trust you. Yet I do not forget her who has a greater claim. Love shoots at queer marks sometimes. You are forgiven, and I shall receive back the Lady Aldrida into favor."

"Your Highness——" I began, rising to my feet.

"You need not thank me. You will go as you came, Sir Verrall. Remember, no word of this interview."

I would have spoken, but Jasar touched my arm, and led me to the door.

"Folly brings destruction dancing at her heels," he whispered. "Yet hope, my son. Folly may not have you in too tight an embrace. Guard, see Sir Verrall to his quarters."

Jasar gave me no chance to ask his meaning, for the sliding door was closed behind me, and I was groping my way to follow the soldier down the black corridor.

CHAPTER XIV**I RETURN TO COURT.**

I HAVE no desire to spare myself. I am not a hero, although some people may be inclined to think me one, nor am I a villain, which possibly many people will dispute. I had used the Lady Aldrida to show off my independence. I had, to put it in civilized language, flirted with her, rather more than was wise, perhaps. I have never laid claim to understanding women well. Those with whom I have been more or less acquainted have treated me very graciously, quite willing to enjoy my society when nobody more interesting was available, and equally willing to politely ignore me when there was, or forget me the moment I was out of sight. This was as it should be; there was no awkwardness when we met, no pain when we parted. So I had found it in England, in France, and even in Germany, where, perhaps, society is a trifle more solemn, and it did not occur to me, at least not at first, that any dangerous results were likely to arise in Drussenland, from a proceeding so prevalent in other countries. True, I had not faced the position, nor taken myself to task, which may suggest that to do so would be unpleasant, but Lady Aldrida was essentially a woman of the world, had had more admirers probably than any one else at Court, and was far too knowing to let what I had

said sink in very deeply. What had I said, or perhaps I ought to ask—what had I not said? I had paid her considerable attention—more than would have been convenient elsewhere, it may be; but in Drussenland nobody did anything by halves, and I had certainly not paid her greater homage than I had seen other knights do. She had forgotten those others easily enough, why should she not forget me?

This conclusion seemed logically worked out, but it had not the effect of relieving my mind. Count Vasca had chosen to make much of the episode; this did not trouble me, for there were personal reasons why he should, but I had to view it in another aspect when Princess Daria recognized Lady Aldrida's claim upon me. The Princess could have no personal reasons. At least—the idea made me pause. Jasar's parting words were strange. He was not an idle talker, he seldom spoke without weighty meaning, and if his last words to me meant anything— No; it was an absurd idea. Wonders do not spring to satisfy men's desires so easily. And yet the Princess's coldness to me may have existed chiefly in my imagination. Amongst many uncertainties, however, one thing was beyond doubt; unless Lady Aldrida was sensible, and appraised my attentions at their true worth, I was in an extremely tight corner.

There was a council next day, and I expected to be called to it. I was in readiness to attend, ready to meet the opposition which was certain to be raised when the question of the prisoners' lives was discussed, but I was not sent for. I kept to my quarters impatient at the delay, wondering if the Princess had regretted her determination of last night to save the prisoners and to recall me.

The first doubt was dispelled when O’Ryan came in.

“Verrall, there’s going to be a riot. It’s got abroad in the town that the prisoners are to be released, and faith, a large part of the town is quite mad.”

“A large part; not all, then?”

“No, there are some who hold with her Highness, but they’re in the minority, and chiefly women, it seemed to me.”

“That’s not so bad,” I answered. “Where women lead, the men will generally follow.”

“You wouldn’t say so if you’d been in the town this morning, though it’s as well you weren’t, perhaps. These Drusenlanders can be mighty uncomplimentary, and you have come in for more abuse in the last hour than you probably merited in all your life. I was advised only just now to cut your acquaintance before my companions took it into their heads to think me as arch a traitor to the country as you are.”

“And you have not taken the advice,” I said, with a smile.

“Well, I’m thinking about it. I explained that there were difficulties, but I let them believe that I was more than half-inclined to throw in with them. It was an excellent plan, for I escaped abuse, and shall probably get hold of useful information. You’ve won a trick, Sir Verrall, but it’s a dangerous game you’re playing. It isn’t worth it.”

“It is.”

“As you will. One of the first suggestions made to me was that I should gain immortal fame if at a convenient opportunity I should insert half-a-foot of

cold steel into you. Of course, being so much with you I could easily make the opportunity."

"Oh! And what did you say to that?"

"I told them I would think about it."

"So much for my enemies; what do my friends say?"

"The number of your friends is not large enough to make a roar of approval. The few who whisper commend your courage; but in the same breath condemn your foolishness—in short, express my sentiments."

"Is the council over?"

"Yes. I saw the Count leave with a little troop of satellites; and faith, I drew back to let him pass without seeing me. He looked like slaying somebody, and I thought I might be a very likely choice of his. Were he to head a revolution just now, he'd win; but he's a coward, Sir Verrall—that's where your chance comes in."

"He is not a coward, O'Ryan, but he has schemes which he does not care to jeopardize."

"Well, he won't be satisfied until he's got you decently buried. That's one of his great schemes, and unless you keep a sharp eye in the back of your head, he'll very likely succeed. He won't meet you face to face, but he's quite capable of paying some poor devil to crawl up behind your back, aye, and hang him afterwards for being such a blackguard as to kill you. He'd laugh with delight at your murder, and cry like a woman at your funeral."

"You have a bad opinion of the Count, O'Ryan. Tell me, how about the priests?"

"I didn't see any."

"They didn't go about stirring up the people?"

"No, they've not come out in public like that, but see here, Verrall; I warrant they've got through a lot of cursing in private, and the muddle-headed wise-aces who proclaimed you the long-expected Knight are like to have a bad time, I'm thinking."

"Did you hear any one speak of my being recalled to Court?" I asked.

"No."

"I shall be recalled to-night, probably."

"Then measure every corner before you turn it."

"I take precautions, O'Ryan." And I opened my clothes to show him a firmly-wrought coat of mail which I wore next my skin. "Since my banishment I have gone thus."

"A piece of wisdom I wouldn't have credited you with," he answered.

"A sharp eye in the back of my head, eh, O'Ryan! Your own phrase, your own advice; but, you see, my caution moved quicker. I have begun the game, and I'm going to play it to the end, but I'm not going to take any chances. I may lose, but they shall fight for every trick."

"Fine courage," he answered, "but darned foolish."

He continued to growl out this sentiment at intervals, until it was impossible to tell which impressed him most—the foolishness or the courage. I fancy commendation of my courage won in the end, as was only natural, for he had plenty of it himself, and a cool head into the bargain to strengthen it.

Late in the evening I was summoned to the palace. I passed through the streets unnoticed, but as soon as I entered the palace I was aware how unpopular

I had become. I read the fact in the eyes of the soldiers on guard and the servants waiting in the ante-rooms for their masters, and although many recognized me courteously enough as I passed through the rooms, I could see that there was no keen desire to claim my companionship. It was so different to the almost cringing deference which had been paid me when I had last been at Court. The reception served to brace up my nerves. Unpopular I might be; still, I could not be ignored. I was respected as a dangerous enemy. I made my way at once to the room where the Princess was, and there I was more kindly welcomed. Discretion I knew prompted this, for since the Princess had recalled me, it would have been unwise for those in closest attendance upon her to show any displeasure. I saw Lady Aldrida at some distance from me, and was not displeased that she did not approach me. I intended to be very humble, so waited on the outskirts of the crowd which surrounded her Highness, until such time as she should observe me, or until some one informed her of my presence. I spoke to none, and bore myself as a man who was yet in disgrace. The Princess was talking brightly to those close to her, but it seemed to me that she was exerting herself to appear at her ease, that her words were far from expressing what was passing through her mind. Her cheeks were flushed, and there was a watchfulness in her eyes, as though she expected something to happen.

Presently Jasar spoke to her, and her eyes wandered until they rested upon me. With a look and an almost imperceptible gesture she motioned me to approach. I imagine that most of those present

knew that I was to be recalled that night, and had gathered about the Princess to see how I behaved, perhaps also hoping to hear her say something about the prisoners.

I fell on my knee before her, as I had done last night, and I smiled to myself to think that I had already been forgiven, and that this was only a show. She used almost the same words, but she spoke as the Princess, not as the woman, and I was certainly unprepared for the use she was going to make of the situation.

“You have greatly angered us, Sir Verrall,” she said, in a low but clear voice. There was silence in the great room in a moment. “By word and action you have sought to disparage our majesty, and to make our authority of none effect. It was in our mind to make your banishment, if not for ever, at least for a much longer time, but seeing that you are a stranger amongst us, knowing our customs imperfectly, and that your words and actions may have been ill-considered rather than ill-meant, we have recalled you that slowly you may prove the loyalty of which you are so quick to boast. Learn, Sir Verrall, that he whose hand goes most readily to his sword to defend his honor is not, of necessity, the man whose honor needs least defending.”

This was not letting me down as lightly as I had expected.

“I humbly crave your Highness’s pardon, and thank you for your clemency. My deeds shall speak my thanks in better fashion.”

“Rise. You have our pardon. See that you deserve our goodwill;” and then, speaking a little louder, she went on “It is indeed a time for men to

prove their loyalty to their sovereign, when her actions tear hoarse disagreement from the throats of many, when the rabble in the street think fit to criticize, soldiers in the camp to whisper threats, and even some at Court to murmur. My actions are framed for the good of Drussenland, for the welfare of its people, high and low, and I shall be quick to deal with those, be they who they may, who attempt to thwart me. If I have hitherto erred upon the side of mercy, let it serve as warning to those who cry out dissatisfaction. I may yet err upon the side of severity."

There was no note of irritability in her voice, none of anger even, as with exquisite dignity she spoke her warning to the crowd about her, many of whom, doubtless, had been loud in their dissatisfaction after the breaking-up of the council that day. Her manner was more impressive than any other could have been, and she heightened the effect of her words by retiring at once, setting the seal upon her determination, as it were. Not until she had gone was the silence broken, and even then voices were hushed and feet shuffled lightly. Nobody was anxious to give voice to his opinion lest a neighbor should repeat it to his disadvantage. No one felt quite safe, for the Princess had given the impression that she knew those who were most deserving of her anger. So far as I was concerned, she could hardly have done better. It was not without motive that I had not been called to the council that day. She had disassociated me from the mercy shown to the prisoners as much as possible, and had, therefore, been especially severe in extending her pardon to me. Still, she had given me what protection she could by showing that she had

courage to act and strength to grip the situation firmly.

I was anxious to know exactly how the Princess's decision had been received by the council that morning, so threaded my way through the crowd to find Walen or some other friend to question. Lady Aldrida, however, intercepted me, and I was obliged to follow her to an unoccupied corner.

"I congratulate you, Sir Verrall, and also I thank you."

"Why thank me?"

"Do I not owe it to you that I have been so graciously received to-night?"

"I assure you that I have said no word on your behalf," I answered.

It was hardly a gallant speech—I did not feel gallant just then. She did not notice it apparently.

"You made me a partner in your petition, and, therefore, I feel a partner in your triumph," she said.

"A poor triumph, I fear."

"Truly great men always speak carelessly of their own deeds. Do you not know that the prisoners are pardoned and will be allowed to depart? You have broken down one of the cruelest laws that disgrace our fair country."

"Were you abroad in the town this morning?" I asked.

"No."

"You would have heard murmurings against the Princess's decision, and loud threats against me. You heard what her Highness said to-night?"

"Yes. She could be very terrible in anger. I

heard that she was angry at the council to-day when the priests sought to make her uphold the law."

"What did the priests say?"

"They prophesied disaster for this country."

"And used threats?"

"Thought them, perhaps, but did not speak them. That they dared not do. It is whispered, I know not with what truth, that Princess Daria does not love the priests too well."

"Still, they would be ugly enemies. They can influence the people, and it is the people who are dangerous when the trumpet of revolution sounds."

"The people!" she exclaimed contemptuously.

"Such contempt has led to many a disaster," I went on. "In other lands the people have risen against their rulers, made their own laws, drenched their country in blood, and have even murdered their king."

"They would not do that in Drussenland," she answered, with childish confidence, and I smiled to think that what had happened in civilized England and light-hearted France could not possibly happen in almost barbarous Drussenland. "In other lands," she went on thoughtfully. "You have seen other lands?"

"Yes."

"You must tell me of them. There is a seat in my garden where the sun plays warmly all the afternoon. You shall tell me as we sit there."

Her calm assumption that to sit there must necessarily be bliss to me was startling. With renewed force I understood how tight a corner I was in.

"The people are dangerous," I said hastily, with a

desperate endeavor to leave the romantic and descend to the commonplace, if anything in my present existence could be called commonplace.

“Not without leaders.”

“Leaders might be found.”

“Where?”

“Even amongst those who pass us in this room,” I answered, lowering my voice.

It was rather curious that Count Vasca passed just then, for almost unconsciously he was in my mind, although I did not see him until after I had spoken.

“At least they will have a Sir Verrall against them.”

I bowed, wishing heartily that she would not so compliment me.

“Ah, my lord, if a woman’s reverence and pride is of value to a man, you should be well armed indeed.”

Lady Aldrida was not going to be sensible. I was perplexed how to make her understand that my wooing of the other night was not of a serious nature. There are many ways of getting out of awkward situations of this kind in England, honorable, some of them—more or less. As a last resource, a man can go and shoot big game in central Africa. But in Drussenland there was no last resource of this kind. There was no getting away from Lady Aldrida, and giving time a chance to heal her wounded feelings. Yet something had got to be done, and done quickly. It occurred to me that I might lay the blame on the customs prevalent in those other lands I knew of, and of which she was anxious to hear. It might even be policy to occupy that sunny garden-seat one afternoon, and explain the circumstances quietly. I think

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—I am not sure, because things of this description are difficult to speak positively about—but I think I should have begun to put matters in train at once to accomplish my end, had we not been interrupted.

A knight — one of the Count's satellites — approached us.

"Your pardon, and yours, my lady. I come from the Count, Sir Verrall. He bids me inform you that you will be entrusted with the safety of her Highness to-night."

"A short notice," I said.

"It has indeed only been arranged just now. The Count thought it might be a pleasant duty, seeing the things which have happened so lately."

"It is a pleasant duty. Will you thank Count Vasca, and tell him that I shall be at my post an hour before midnight?"

"It is good to be a Princess to command such a sentinel," said Lady Aldrida, when he had gone.

I could not have had a better opening for a pretty answer, but I did not avail myself of it. I was glad to have so good an excuse for leaving her. The little fiction concerning the customs of other lands must stand over for the present. I made my adieux hastily.

"Good-night," she said, "and if the night seems long, remember my thoughts surround you."

I bent over her hand a moment. Surely I could do no less to thank her for such kindness. Still, the knowledge that I was to have the companionship of her thoughts through the night hours gave me little comfort. Folly had indeed got me in a tight embrace.

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CHAPTER XV

SENTINEL TO THE SOVEREIGN

It was a custom in Drussenland—an ancient one, believe—that a knight should stand sentinel until the dawn at the entrance to the Sovereign's apartments. It was a custom which was rather sentimental than useful, for the palace was always well guarded. The honor was given only to an accredited knight, one who had earned a reputation for valor, so it was not strange that the duty had not fallen to me until now. I had certainly earned the right to be considered eligible, but that I had been chosen for this particular night gave me ample food for reflection as I went back to my quarters. Count Vasca had taken the credit for doing me a service; but, since at the present time he could have less reason than ever for loving me, I did not believe in his goodwill. Most probably he could not help giving me the honor, and had, therefore, made the best of it. Having arrived at this conclusion, it was not difficult to find a reason for my being chosen for that night. The Princess herself must have expressed a wish that the duty should fall to me, and had therein given me a proof of her favor—something to counteract the severity with which she had spoken to me that evening.

I had nearly reached my quarters when, at a corner

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of the street, a hand was laid upon my shoulder. In an instant my hand was upon my sword hilt.

"The second time you have received me as an enemy, Sir Verrall," said Jasar.

"It was your own advice that I should fear shadows and ever be ready to defend myself," I answered.

"You are to be sentinel to-night?"

"Yes. I thank her Highness for this mark of her trust in me."

"The Princess knew nothing of it until I discovered that it was arranged," said Jasar. "That is why I am here waiting for you."

"You think the appointment to-night may mean treachery?"

"I cannot tell that, but I would have you use quick eyes through the night watches."

"I thank you for your warning. In truth, I have grown accustomed in these days to think every one an enemy until he has proved himself a friend."

"That is wisdom at all times, Sir Verrall. Even when danger does not lurk in every corner," he answered. "Still, to-night I cannot claim such friendship as you credit me with. It was not by my own thought that I came."

I caught my breath a little.

"I am charged with a message," he said.

"The sender?" I asked.

"For only one do I carry a message, Sir Verrall."

"The message, then?" I said, my excitement, I am sure, plainly discernible in my voice.

"Be a faithful and a loyal knight, and the God you worship grant you safety."

"I pray so," I answered. "Tell me——"

“Sir Verrall, I was charged with no further speech, and I detain you.”

He turned from me abruptly, and with rapid strides left me.

It had been pleasant to fancy that it was by the Princess's desire that I was sentinel to-night, but that she had sent me such a message was more pleasant still. The bare words were nothing compared to the meaning that I felt was conveyed in them.

The entrance to the Princess's apartments was in a spacious corridor, which at one end was approached by a wide staircase, the other end leading only to rooms occupied by her suite. Two soldiers stood at the head of the staircase, and they saluted me as I passed. Their faces were unfamiliar to me. I took up my position at the entrance, and drew my sword. It was about eleven o'clock, as near as I could tell, and it was evident that the Princess had not yet retired, for servants passed in and out of her apartments for some time after I arrived. But I caught no sight nor sound of her, though I watched each opening of the door, and listened for even a low murmur to recognize. Sounds came from other parts of the palace for some time, and it was certainly past midnight when the last servant left the apartments, and I heard the door barred behind him. He carried a torch, which flickered redly on the walls of the corridor as he went, and then gradually disappeared as he turned the corner which hid the head of the staircase. I heard the guards there bid him good-night, so a call from me would bring them to my assistance should it be necessary. The corridor was in darkness, save for a glimmer of light at the upper end from some opening placed high in the wall. It was as

dark as pitch towards the staircase. No sound came to me, excepting the slight creaking of my armor as I changed my position. Once I thought I heard the men at the end of the corridor move, but the sound was so slight that I may have been mistaken. It was an honor to be sentinel—a recognized honor, but it was one which a man would not choose to have often. I don't think it occurred to me to have any fear, for although I watched over the safety of the Princess, the guards by the staircase watched over me. Danger could only come from that direction, and I should have waring of its coming from them. But I did begin to feel tired and drowsy. Once eliminate fear, and I defy any one to feel wakeful in darkness and silence. I tried to think of something in a consecutive manner, but this only had the effect of making me more sleepy. I remembered that Lady Aldrida's thoughts were with me, but even this knowledge did not arouse me.

I believe the point of my sword was on the ground, and that I was almost leaning upon the weapon for support, when a slight sound suddenly startled me. I was on the alert in a moment, but I could not locate it, nor tell what manner of sound it was. Something had startled me, and that was all I was conscious of. I stood perfectly still, and listened. I could hear my own heart beating out its regular throbs, and at first nothing else. I was facing down the corridor towards the staircase. It was pitch dark, and I came to the conclusion that I could hear nothing, and yet instinctively I knew that the darkness hid something—something which threatened me. It seemed to palpitate in front of me, silently, but none the less certainly. I put out my hand, passed it in front of

me and at my side. It rested against the wall of the corridor, at the sharp corner, one side of the entrance to the Princess's apartments. I swept my sword round me at the full extent of my arm, but it touched nothing, yet something was there, and I knew it. My left hand rested on the corner of the wall, and with my right I gripped my weapon tightly, holding it before me in an attitude of defence. It was with difficulty that I restrained myself from challenging the unknown danger. I could see nothing, hear nothing, and yet the atmosphere in front of me stirred, almost as though some one breathed in my face. Had I been superstitious, I should have put my visitor down as a ghostly one, for how could a material enemy have passed the guards at the head of the staircase?

Suddenly something touched me so gently that it might have been the brush of a bat's wing. It touched my arm extended to the wall. The next moment a swift blow fell upon my shoulder, and I felt a spasm of pain run through me, for sharp steel had penetrated the joint of the armor. A second blow fell so quickly after the first, that for a moment I thought I had more than one assailant. The blow failed in its purpose, glancing from my armor, and then I was grappling with a desperate man. He was not clad in steel as I was, I could feel that, but he had the advantage of me, for he closed with me and could use his dagger, whilst for a time my sword was useless. He was conscious of his advantage, and struck at me again and again in quick succession, striking where he knew my armor would serve me least, yet, fortunately for me, striking beside the mark.

I did not call for help at once; I cannot say why.

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Perhaps I was too much occupied to think of it; perhaps, seeing that there was only one against me, my pride would not let me. We swung from side to side, I endeavoring to get my sword into play, he bent upon preventing my doing so. The pain in my shoulder became sharper, and I knew that a successful blow from that dagger might end the struggle. I gathered all my strength together, and, striking out with my left arm, wrenched myself from his grasp. With a low growl, like an animal at bay, he sprang at me; but at last my sword-arm was free. A mass of darkness seemed to detach itself from the surrounding blackness, and then my weapon pierced it swiftly and cleanly. My wrist hardly felt the resistance. There was a low cry, a half-smothered sob, and then a dull thud at my feet.

"Ho, guard!" I cried, not too loudly, for fear of disturbing the Princess, yet my voice echoed in the silence.

The echo was the only answer. I waited a few moments; then I called again, and louder.

"Guard, ho, guard!"

Again an echo, but this time other sounds. Hurrying feet ascended the stairs, there was a glare of torchlight at the end of the corridor, and two soldiers came toward me. They were not the men I had seen on guard. There was another sound behind me. A bolt was shot back, a door opened and Jasar stood silhouetted in light, and behind him the Princess.

"What is it?" said Jasar.

"A dead man, I fear," I answered.

The torches flared in the white face of my enemy. It roused him.

"A better death than the other," he groaned.

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Jasar fell on his knees beside him and raised him a little. The Princess stood at my side.

“What other death?” said Jasar.

“He said I should be free if—if I killed him.”

“Who said it? Speak, man!”

“He——” and then came a sob.

I think the priest shook him to try to get the answer to his question, but my sword had done its work too well. The prostrate man shivered a little, his limbs twitched for a moment, and then with one sudden thrusting out of his legs, he slipped from Jasar’s arms and lay still.

I turned to look at the Princess.

“You are hurt,” she said.

She had caught up a fold of her white gown. So close to me was she that blood from the wound in my shoulder had fallen upon her.

“A scratch—nothing,” I answered, yet I felt a dizziness creeping over me.

“Do you know him?” she asked sharply, pointing to the dead man.

“No.”

“Look.”

I turned almost mechanically, for my legs seemed suddenly to have grown too feeble to support me.

“Do you know him?”

“No; yet—— By Heaven, yes; it is one of them!”

The dead man was one of the prisoners of war.

CHAPTER XVI

A TIME OF DELIRIUM.

I OPENED my eyes and lay still, as one does when waking from a deep, refreshing sleep. I may have dozed again after my first consciousness, I do not know; but presently I was aware that the roof of the chamber was strange to me. Then I moved to look around me. The sunlight fell upon rich hangings, antique and luxurious furniture, and rugs of brilliant colors; a very different lodging to my own. I took in my surroundings slowly, piece by piece, and then I attempted to sit up.

"You must lie quite still."

An arm was laid across to prevent my moving—a woman's arm. She spoke gently, she touched me gently, but there was no resistance in me, for as I moved a pain like a stab of hot iron ran downwards from my shoulder. It helped me to recall what had happened.

I looked at the woman. She was a stranger to me.

"Where am I?"

"You must not move, nor talk. You are in safe keeping," she answered.

I think I smiled—I know I tried to. I felt in safe keeping. There was that in her face which assured me of it. I closed my eyes, the light tried them, and I was conscious that she watched me for a time.

Then when she thought I slept she passed behind one of the hangings. I lay watching for her return, and gradually the memory of what had happened came back to me—the dark corridor, the unseen foe, the silent struggle, then the flashing torches, and the man lying there still—dead.

The woman did not return; but presently the curtain was drawn back, and Jasar entered.

“Awake, Sir Verrall, at last? It has been a long sleep. Is the arm painful?”

“A little.”

“You must keep quiet. It is a bad wound, Sir Verrall; but brave men often carry ugly scars.”

“Where am I?”

“In the Princess’s apartments; a safer place than any other for you, just now. Guards stand day and night without, and within are gentle hands to tend you.”

“The man died last night?” I asked.

“He died, but not last night. Three nights ago. I told you your sleep had been a long one.”

“Three nights!”

“Yes; but you must not talk now,” Jasar said. “Presently we will talk, and then I will answer all your questions.”

I had no desire to question him then. I felt weak. It was a trouble to talk. I watched the sunlight grow to a deeper color. I heard the breeze stirring like soft music, and a bird singing. I did not notice Jasar leave me; but I knew that a woman’s hands arranged my pillows, drew the coverings closer round me, and held a cup of wine to my lips. Perhaps I thanked her, I do not know. My consciousness slipped away from me, and I was living in another world, a

world of bustle, crowded streets, hurrying men and women. I walked in it, yet was not of it. No knights saluted me, no Princess did I see, no torches quivered redly in the darkness, nor did the sound of ringing steel fall upon my ears. I was a stranger in this world of busy merchantmen, of lamp-lit streets, of rumbling traffic, and the never-ending hum of human voices. In my delirium I returned to seething London, and it was strange to me. In my waking moments—or, I should say, the lucid intervals in my delirium, for many days passed as I tossed hour after hour upon my couch, and sunlight followed darkness, of which, for the most part, I was unconscious—two faces looked into mine, the priest's and that of the woman who nursed me. Never once that of the Princess. I tried, once, to ask whether she had been to see me; but either I was too weak to put my thoughts into words, or else my nurse did not hear me.

It was a small wound to weaken me so. I was ashamed of it, when I became convalescent enough to notice it.

"It was much worse than it is now," my nurse told me when she bandaged it one day.

"I am glad, for it looks nothing, and I have been very ill."

"Very ill," she said.

"And you have nursed me all the time?"

"Yes. Her Highness has left you to my care."

"Does she know how ill I have been?"

"I have answered her questions each day, and sometimes she has been to look at you."

I asked no more. I fancied that my nurse did not wish to be questioned.

Once convalescent, I began to mend rapidly.

O'Ryan was sent for to look after me; but the Princess did not come, and Jasar only seldom. When the priest did come, he would tell me little of what was going on. He was always in a hurry, always promised to have a long talk with me as soon as he had time; but when I suggested that I was well enough to be about again, declared very emphatically that I was mistaken, and that I was not allowed to leave my apartments at present.

"Why not?"

"Sick men recovering feel better than they really are," he answered with a smile, and he effectually silenced my arguments by leaving me.

Nor was O'Ryan much more communicative.

"You're to be kept quiet. No excitement. No politics," he said.

"But I'm well again, man."

"Getting on, but not well."

"I feel like a prisoner."

"And, by Saint Patrick, that's pretty well what you are," he answered.

"A prisoner!" I exclaimed, crossing the room towards the door.

O'Ryan stopped me.

"No good," he said. "It's fastened on the outside. Better not make the guards suspicious. I am carefully looked at every time I come and go."

"But why? What has happened in the city?"

"Faith, they've been crowding a lot of history into a few days," he answered. "But see here, Sir Verrall, I am under oath to answer no questions. I should not have been allowed to come at all without giving the oath. There have been occasions when I haven't

kept these kind of bargains, but I'm going to keep this one."

"Surely we can be honest with each other?"

"It isn't honest to break an oath."

"Our safety may demand it."

"It doesn't," he replied. "It's the other way, I'm told."

"Who told you so? Who made you take an oath?"

"Her Highness."

"The Princess?" I said, in astonishment. "Am I her prisoner?"

"Well, I don't rightly know whose prisoner you are, or why you're being kept here, but her Highness sent for me, and gave me my instructions. She was mighty pleasant, too, Verrall—said nice things about me, and let slip a good many promises for the future. She may forget them, of course, but I'm not going to give her a chance of withdrawing them, any way. I'm going to act square with her."

"She has made an impression upon you, then, at last?" I said.

"Verrall, I'll admit there are points about her which are not conspicuous in all females. She and Bridget have much in common."

I laughed, and then asked, after a pause—

"Did she say anything of me?"

"You were mentioned as my master, that was all. No, you were not a prominent feature of our conversation."

"And how long is this to last?" I asked somewhat angrily. A long illness makes a man irritable.

"You'll oblige me by asking no questions. I'm on oath to a lady not to answer them."

No persuasion would move him, and my nurse who came in and out constantly, either knew nothing, or was under a similar oath. Jasar was my only hope, and he kept out of my way.

However, he came one morning, and was not in a hurry. He expressed himself pleased at my appearance, and said he had come to have a long talk with me.

“And will, I hope, answer my questions.”

“Some of them, doubtless, but all—— Ah, Sir Verrall, that might not be wise. Stay, we will have a quiet talk.”

He spoke to O’Ryan and the nurse, who left us at once.

“Who is my nurse?” I asked.

“One of the ladies attending upon the Princess. You are growing well again, so it is fair to say that her Highness made a good choice. It was suggested that Lady Aldrida should be sent to nurse you.”

He watched me with that queer smile upon his face which I had noticed so often.

“It was a natural suggestion,” he said, when I made no answer; “but there were circumstances which might have made the lady an awkward nurse. No, I cannot tell you what the circumstances were, so do not ask me.”

“I seem to have slipped back into childhood,” I said irritably. “Am I for ever to be kept in ignorance of what goes on around me? Why am I a prisoner here? Has Vasca headed a revolution, and been successful?”

“Had he done so, you would have been no longer even a prisoner. But come; I will save your questionings, and tell you what I can. You, perhaps, re-

member what the man who attacked you said when he was dying?"

"That he should be free if he killed me."

"I judged that was what he meant," said Jasar. "I tried to get him to tell more, but he died too quickly. If he spoke truly—and if ever a man does speak truly, it is when his life is flickering just before going out—he must have been deceived, for freedom had already been granted to all the prisoners without conditions. Indeed, the other prisoners were released before the man could have attacked you, and left the city unmolested. Therefore, Sir Verrall, an enemy has endeavored to take your life by the hand of this prisoner."

"And the enemy?" I asked.

"The man died before he could speak," Jasar answered.

"But how did he pass the guards at the head of the staircase?"

"As soon as your safety had been looked after, and you had been brought here, her Highness sent for the men. The truth will, perhaps, never be known. I believe they had been withdrawn from their post on some pretext. At any rate, they were not allowed to betray any one. When they were sent for, they were found dead at the foot of the staircase, stabbed, both of them—in the back."

I shuddered. Perhaps I was not yet strong enough to bear the recital of these ghastly details.

"There was treachery in our midst," Jasar continued. "The whole palace was awake at once, and even in the town there was little sleep that night. Search was made for the murderers in vain. At the council next day, her Highness did her utmost to

probe the matter to the root. She let it be understood that she believed it treachery against herself, that the assassin's dagger was intended for her; and a shout of loyalty was the answer. It rang in the rafters of the council hall, and found an echo in every street in the city. Then, Sir Verrall—and mark you this well—her Highness said that it was you who had saved the life of the Sovereign, coming near to your own death in the act. There was no shout of praise, Sir Verrall. Almost a dead silence followed.”

“Her Highness tried to throw her protection over me, and failed,” I said quietly.

“She failed, yes—even worse than failed, for the priests attacked you fiercely for breaking their laws. They held that your advice had been proved worthless, since one of these prisoners had attempted to kill the Princess, and many saw reason in their argument. Further, they spoke of your mission to Drusenland to set the Princess on the throne in Yadasara, and to bring to the light of day that which had for so long been hidden—the treasure which legend tells us lies buried in this land.”

“Did they say that they had been mistaken in proclaiming me the expected Knight?”

“The priests are wiser than that, Sir Verrall,” he answered. “They have studied again. You were the Knight, but you have broken the laws of Drusenland, you have angered the God who sent you, therefore you have failed in your mission.”

“Will they despatch me, then, and wait for another Knight?” I asked.

“Doubtless they would if opportunity occurred. They have uttered endless prophecies concerning this land—disasters which shall surely come upon it until

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you are gone to meet the just punishment which awaits you in the land from whence you came."

"And how am I to go?" I asked.

"There are many ways. You might go to the mountains unexpectedly, as from the mountains you came unexpectedly."

I smiled.

"But there is a quicker way," said Jasar.

I looked at him inquiringly.

"A much quicker way—death."

"Death—how? In the market-place?"

The priest nodded.

"Death comes to every man once," I said. "It would have been better to die here quietly, better than the shout of a rabble at a quivering thing bound to a stake; but who can choose how or when he will die?"

Jasar did not take his eyes from me.

"They say the Lady Aldrida fell in a swoon when her women told her what the priests had decreed."

"Death will end that folly, at least," I answered.

"And the Princess, are you her messenger to tell me that the people's voice is too strong, their will too unanimous to resist? Well, I said my life was hers when she should ask it. The time has come quickly."

"My son, illness has weakened you. Have you no desire left to cut a path through these enemies of yours and of hers?"

"Her will is my law," I replied. "What is her will?"

"That she must tell you. You ask why you are a prisoner here. Without these walls dangers in crowds stand awaiting you. Only now are you regaining strength, only now are you again becoming the knight

who withstood Count Vasca in the lists, and fought so valiantly yonder before Yadasara. You have been a child, muttering in your sleep, too weak to lift an arm to defend yourself. So for your own safety you have been a prisoner."

"Muttering in my sleep? What did I speak of?"

"Of many things strange to me, of some I cannot tell you. But the Princess chose your nurse. Your words are known only to her, to the Princess, and to myself."

"You cannot tell me anything of what I said?"

"Not now," he answered. "To-night I will come for you, and you shall talk with the Princess."

"Tell me one thing," I said, as he rose to go. "Spoke I of the Princess in my delirium?"

"Yes. Her name was sometimes on your lips."

"Did the Princess hear me?"

"I do not know."

"At least, she was told?"

"Perhaps."

"Is that why the Lady Aldrida was not sent for to nurse me?"

"It was thought that she would not be so good a nurse as the one you had, Sir Verall—not so patient and gentle. I know no more than that."

I let him leave me without further question. What had I said is my delirium? Had I told my secret? Had I confessed that I loved Princess Daria? To-night I should see her; would her face tell me something of what I had said?

How slowly the sun sank towards his setting!

CHAPTER XVII

THE PRINCESS'S GARDEN.

HER face told me nothing that night. She received me very graciously—would not let me kneel to her; but there was something in her manner which made me feel that the hopes which had grown up in my heart so quickly that day were luxuriant weeds, fit only to be cut down. She would not let me talk much about what had happened in the city.

“We are in perilous times,” she said; “but you must be my prisoner still. You are not yet able to brave dangers. Here, you are safe. Get strong again quickly, Sir Verrall, for I have need of you.”

And so she dismissed me. Jasar smiled. Perhaps he understood something of my disappointment, which kept me wakeful during the night. But morning came—a day destined to be the first of many pleasant days, days in which those hopes of mine flourished again and were not so promptly cut down, some of them standing uninjured even when others fell.

It is more difficult, it seems to me, to remember in detail the hours which bring joy with them than those which are sorrow-laden. Sorrow comes with a sharp stab, and the thoughts are concentrated by the pain; but joy comes diffused, moments of hope looking golden and great through the lenses of desire,

moments of doubt to be presently forgotten. A word, simple enough, spoken lightly it may be, whispers a volume of meaning to a heart anxious to believe. So it was with me. I cannot point to precise moments when certain words or actions inspired me with hopes, the very possession of which made me tremble. I cannot set down in cold words what I tried to convey. Doubtless my speech was halting; but love has a language all its own—a language with a small vocabulary, but a wealth of meaning in looks and silence.

Princess Daria had a garden. The only entrance to it was from her suite of apartments. High walls surrounded it, and there was no fear of prying eyes. There were shady nooks in it, and cunningly devised corners where one might sit and dream the whole day long undisturbed. There was a marble basin in it, round which flowers clung; and in the water gold and silver fish darted incessantly. It was no trim garden, with beds precisely cut and paths swept clean. Tendrils crept at will, and daisies peeped out from the grass, little glimmering stars. Mingled perfumes filled the air—perfumes by Nature blended. It was a garden of trees which caught the breeze of evening and turned to low music amongst the leaves, trees that spread wide arms in welcome to the birds, and treasured the nests as if they loved them; a garden where the sunlight fell all day, yet not too hotly, a garden where moonlight traced fantastic patterns, made ghostly shadows, and lent a mystery to the night.

Here I was privileged to walk or lie at full length in the shade of some tree, filling my lungs with new health at every breath. Here Jasar and I talked, and the Princess joined us, staying only a little while

at first, but afterwards longer. She talked of plans for the future. My friends were so few that it was impossible for me to stand unless something could be devised against my enemies. Truth to tell, my friends and enemies troubled me little just then. I was too happy to fear the future, for the Princess became each day less a Princess and more a woman. I lived in the present. I told them something of my country, of London, of railways and telegraphs and of many things which in Drussenland had never been heard of. The Princess, leaning her head upon her hand, listened intently as a child will listen to an engrossing fairy-tale; but the priest smiled with superior knowledge. I know he made me angry more than once.

"You tell of strange things, Sir Verrall," he said. "But because the people in Drussenland are superstitious and legend-loving, you must not think that we are all ready to believe tales so far beyond all possibility."

"I speak the truth. There are even more marvelous things that I have not told you of."

"Sir Verrall, there is no need to speak carefully here. Her Highness loves not superstition, and has no fear of disasters which the priests prophesy. We know that no miracle brought you into our land, and that to account for your coming you used a legend to save yourself. Why seek to deceive us who are your friends?"

"Yes, friends," said the Princess softly.

I was inclined to be angry, but a moment's reflection told me how impossible my tales must seem to them.

"Indeed, there is no deceit," I answered. "Things are as I have told you in my country. Besides, my

coming was somewhat of a miracle, and it was not I who claimed to be the expected Knight, remember. It was O'Ryan who suggested it, and the priests believed it."

Then I told them how I came into Drussenland, beginning with the tale that poor Mustapha told that night.

"To the world beyond these great mountains of yours, the very existence of such a country as Drussenland is considered a legend," I went on. "Shut in as you are, you have been left behind. Your customs are old-fashioned; the world has moved on, making new discoveries, and these things I tell you of are the things of every day, so common that they have ceased to be marvellous."

"We have heard something of the world outside," said the Princess. "The rebels have gathered men from thence and brought them secretly into Drussenland."

"How?" I asked.

"I do not know," she answered. "Some of the priests so-called, who in Yadasara make mockery of all religion, found the way."

I looked at Jasar.

"I do not know it either," he said. "It is a secret known only to a few, and they keep it fast. True Drussenlanders seek not to know it. The history of our country—that part of it which is known, and not legendary—is only of ourselves. We are a people to ourselves. The hordes that live beyond these mountains are nothing to us, nor we to them. Great Nature has cast her hills about us, and made us what we are. It is a sin to seek to undo what God has

done so well, and terrible vengeance shall, in good time, fall upon those who attempt to do so."

He spoke passionately. It was the first time I had seen him at all excited. Jasar had declared that he was no believer in legend and superstition, gloried in what his brethern chose to call his unorthodox views; yet deep down in his heart I could perceive the root of superstition. He clung to many of his old beliefs in spite of himself. The Princess said nothing. I wondered how far she was in agreement with the priest.

"Tell me the history of Drussenland," I said.

And he told it to me, hurrying through the legendary part, dilating fully on that which was known to be true. But it was the legendary part which interested me most, for from it I could build up the story of this strange people, and account for some of their customs and their religion.

This is no place to tell a history. Even as Jasar told it, it would fill many pages. A few facts that I gathered will suffice. The Drussenlanders were the descendants of a great army gathered from all the nations of the world—so Jasar said—which was led into a country beyond the hills to fight for the true religion. Year after year this army, constantly recruited, fought with varying success, and at last came peace. Some returned home again; some remained in the land of their warfare, took wives of the daughters of the land, and wandered forth to find a city to dwell in. So they had come to Drussenland, and, as the years passed, became a great people. This was the legendary part which Jasar said might have some truth in it.

To me it seemed clear. These people were descended from the survivors of the last Crusade. Many, it is known, never returned to Europe, and what more probable than that they should draw together and become a people to themselves? All Europe had furnished warriors for the Crusades; hence the curious jumble of the language which had become the tongue of Drussenland. Then the religion. The chapel where I had kept my vigil had little to distinguish it from a church in England, and the God they worshipped was the true God. There was nothing marvellous in the fact that so many symbols had crept into their worship.

Not just then, but by degrees, I told the Princess and Jasar of the Crusades, and the Princess, at least, believed me when I declared that much of the legend was true. Perhaps Jasar believed more than he admitted.

Yet ever and again, in the midst of such conversation, the Princess would lead me to consider my present position. No ancient history could help me in that.

"The days pass swiftly," she said. "You are almost strong now. The priests clamor for action, and the people cry with them. What are we to do?"

It was a grave question.

"Jasar suggested a way out of the difficulty," I answered. "My death would relieve your Highness of much trouble."

She shot a swift glance of anger at the priest. He told me afterwards that I had been the cause of some bitter words spoken to him.

"It is no time to talk folly. It is time to act," was all she said to me.

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"I meant it not foolishly," I answered. "I told you my life was yours when you asked it."

"I need knights with strong arms and strong courage—not dead men," she said.

I was thoughtful for a time.

"Have the people ceased to believe that I am the expected Knight?" I asked suddenly.

"I hardly know. They cry at the priests' bidding that you have done nothing of what you promised."

"Are they loyal to you?"

"Apart from your cause—yes," she answered; "but this city is not safe for you."

"I have many friends—more than, perhaps, your Highness is aware of. They would rally round me. I have a mind to put the matter to the test."

"You have many enemies, too; not least amongst them my own kinsman, Count Vasca."

If she ever had loved the Count, she forgot it then, I fancy. I saw a great hope for myself, since she was so angry with him.

"Your Highness knows me for what I am, but others know only what is told of me. Once more I will use the legend. I believe that an attack upon Yadasara, well planned, would be successful. I believe your enemies may be defeated. Let me come to the council, and I will tell them so. I will volunteer to go to Yadasara to spy out where the city is weakest. So shall I not be accused of doing nothing to fulfill my mission. So shall I be rid of my enemies for a while, and when I return——"

"Return!" she exclaimed. "Think you there is safety for you in Yadasara?"

"They welcome always a warrior who will fight for them. My servant was of some importance in the

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king's army. He shall go with me, and I warrant will make a tale that shall give me safety."

"And afterwards?"

She asked the question with a sigh.

"Would you not rule in Yadasara, and the land be at peace again, if success attends me?"

"You will not return."

"Then I shall die for your sake. I ask nothing better than that."

It was hardly true, for I was much more anxious to live for her sake.

"Is there no other way?" she asked.

"Did we know how these warriors from the outer world were brought into Drussenland, there would be another road from danger."

"You would flee?"

"Yes, but not alone. I came from a good land, but I shall never return to it—alone."

"You would——"

And then she paused.

"I would say to the woman I love, Come, come with me."

She laid her hand upon my arm.

"That woman would do well to think much before she answered," she said. "You have never asked why Lady Aldrida was not sent to nurse you."

"I partly know the reason. In my sleep I muttered things which would not have pleased her. Believe me, in my sleep I spoke truly."

"Yet you know not what you said."

"I can guess."

"There was a keen edge in the wind which shook the trees just now. Good-night."

I raised her hand to my lips, and she did not prevent me. Then she left the garden.

For three days I did not see her. I looked eagerly for her coming, and found a long talk with Jasar wearisome. Had I angered her? Why did she not come? I asked the priest if she were ill. He answered that she was busy. The fourth day was drawing to its close when I saw her coming slowly through the garden. I went to meet her.

"The council is to-morrow," she said.

"Then this is my last night here. I thank your Highness for your great kindness to me."

"To-morrow you must be brave, for your own sake and—for mine," she said, after a pause.

"For your sake I would dare all things."

She seated herself on a stone bench beneath a tree, and I stood beside her.

"You would be glad to return to your own land?" she said.

"Yes."

"There would be many to welcome so brave a knight."

"In my own land I am not a knight," I answered. "I drew my sword first in your service, and for you it will be drawn at the last."

"But there would be many to welcome you," she persisted.

"I can recall no one who would greatly rejoice."

"Your Princess?"

"A Queen reigns in England, but she has no knowledge of me."

"Has she no knights to do her bidding?"

"Yes, but not such knights as you have in Drusenland."

“It was I who made you a knight,” she said.

“And have I not been faithful and true?”

“The long-expected Knight—the Knight of the Silver Star,” she murmured; and then she said: “Why are you so anxious to return if there is no one to welcome you?”

“If I return at all, I shall not go alone. I shall live and die in Drussenland, unless the woman I love goes with me to my own country.”

“And yet you seek to place me on the throne in Yadasara, making me greater than I am now. You claim no reward for such a service.”

My heart leaped within me. She understood, and yet was not angry at my presumption.

“My love claims nothing. It only waits.”

She did not answer.

“It waits until I dare to tell it all. Once I claimed a reward, and was refused. I have not forgotten. I shall never claim again, but ask humbly, for I cannot bear refusal a second time.”

“You will fail in Yadasara.”

“I mean to succeed. If I fail, and if I return, there is that other way I spoke of. In Yadasara I may at least find the key to that. If I never return——”

“Ah! You must.”

She rose, and stood at her full height before me. For a moment I was tempted to take her in my arms, for almost there was an answer in her cry to my love.

“You would sorrow if I did not return?” I asked.

“You must return. Tell me, by what name are you called in your own land?”

“Clinton Verrall.”

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"Clinton Verrall," she repeated softly. "It is a pretty name."

"It is the name of the man who worships you," I answered, and I took her hand, and, bending low, kissed it passionately. I dared not touch her lips.

There was the sound of a footstep upon the path, and Jasar came to us.

"The Count is asking for your Highness."

"I will come," she answered, and something in her tone dismissed Jasar, for he left us at once.

"Who worships you," I repeated.

She let her hand rest in mine for a moment.

"Sir Verrall—for so you are in Drussenland—be brave for my sake to-morrow. For my sake, return from Yadasara."

Our eyes met for a moment, steadily. Then she left me.

CHAPTER XVIII**THE COUNCIL.**

THE council was fixed for the afternoon. It was an unusual time; but the Princess had so ordered it. I spent the morning thinking out my plan in detail, for this was no occasion to make a slip or to lose an opportunity by being unprepared. I was excited. It annoyed me that my hands trembled, and that I could not sit still. My ideas, even the words I meant to speak, went from my memory when I attempted to rehearse them. However, my old capability of being able to brace myself up when the time for action came did not desert me now, and the moment I entered the hall I felt equal to any emergency. Danger hung in the air, and my courage rose to meet it.

The hall presented very much the same appearance as when I had first entered it. Then all eyes had turned to me, wondering if I were the Knight so long expected. All eyes were turned upon me now, most of them lit with anger. A low murmur, like a whispered growl, sounded round me, and I knew that I was in the midst of men whose hands were ready to work my destruction at the bidding of a leader strong enough to set the Princess at defiance.

“The law-breaker.”

“A bad councillor for the Princess.”

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"He would be our king, if we would have him."

"Out, man, that is to insult the lady who rules over us."

I caught the muttered comments, though they were spoken softly. Who had suggested that I wished to be their king? It was strange that such an accusation should follow upon what had happened last night.

But these murmurs were at the lower end of the hall—were the words of men who were easily swayed. A bold declaration from me might easily turn their jeers to applause. They knew me for a knight who had shown no fear, and soldiers listen easily and cry ready praise to such a one, if he can only wake an echo in their hearts.

At the upper end of the hall I was received practically in silence. My reputation was great enough to give me this respect from men I might call to account for insolence. The priests turned frowning faces to me, and drew back a little as I passed. The action showed their distrust and hatred, and was calculated to do me harm with those who were guided by the priests. I felt my cheeks flush, and angry words sprang readily to my lips, but I did not speak them. I only walked a little more erect. Now. I did not stand below the platform, as I think some expected me to do. I mounted the steps and took my place as near to the Princess's chair as possible. I endeavored to hold my own firmly but courteously, neither making myself too prominent nor seeking to escape observation. I was not a prisoner about to plead for mercy, but a man prepared to hurl defiance in the teeth of a crowd incensed against me. Vasca stood beside the chair, and to him I bowed.

Then I turned to the chief of the priests and bowed to him, lower still. He was my greatest enemy to-day. Vasca was civil; it would have surprised a stranger to learn how much he hated me. But the priest was even a better actor. His face assumed a look of pity and sorrow.

“My son, you come promptly and with a good presence. Courage is a great gift bestowed alike on those who do ill and those who do well.”

“True. I have seen great courage in ill-doers. It should be a gift for those only who use it well. We should then have less strife in the land, and honest men could stand undaunted at the cries of the envious.”

He had spoken in a low voice, much in the manner of a father to an erring son. His hypocrisy made me answer, but I, too, spoke in a low tone. Only those immediately about us could have heard.

I had told the Princess that I had many friends, but I doubted whether the statement was true as I glanced at those about me. Two or three whom I had reckoned amongst my supporters spoke some commonplace to me, but no word of sympathy to strengthen me. They seemed afraid to touch the subject which concerned us so nearly just then, or else the prophecies of the priests had made them afraid. And as I looked down into the hall, my task seemed hopeless. What words could I speak to sway them? Was it not, indeed, possible that I might anger them more, and if so, would even the presence of the Princess save me? I had a vision of that almost motionless crowd, stung to fury and storming the platform to wreak their vengeance upon me.

Purposely, I think, the Princess did not keep the

council waiting. I had taken my place only a few moments when the curtains were drawn, and she stepped to her seat. She shot one swift glance at me, so swift that I doubt if any other noticed it. She bowed proudly as a roar of voices welcomed her, but she looked pale and anxious.

Then there was silence. There is no silence so impressive as when an eager crowd waits breathlessly.

“It has even been our custom in Drussenland to let even a prisoner speak an answer to his accusers.” It was a relief to hear her voice break the silence. She spoke softly, yet so clearly that she must have been heard even in the farthest corner. “In these days, however, it has pleased certain of our subjects to speak bitterly of one who is not a prisoner—one who came to us, and was welcomed by us as a Knight long expected in our land. The judgment that he was what he has claimed to be rested not with us. Wisdom greater than ours declared his coming to be propitious to our State, and in arms he has borne himself gallantly, as many a valiant warrior can here attest. Yet some amongst us have spoken bitterly of him, and more—have, in their hearts, condemned him without a hearing. That is, indeed, injustice. But worse offence has been committed. In our own palace, at our very door, was this knight attacked while he guarded our person. If the assassin’s knife were raised against us, then truly we and all our loyal subjects owe this knight thanks for his protection of us. If, as some affirm, the attack was made upon the knight, then are there some amongst us whom it would be well to stamp out, since, for lack of courage, they seek to murder, and are no true

Drussenlanders. We know that the hand which held the knife was not the hand of him who devised the crime. The tool paid dearly for his part, and so, in good time, shall they who planned, and who, to screen themselves from our anger, silenced for ever the guards who could have betrayed them. Now, we are here not to judge, nor of our wish is this council called together. It is by the wish of the knight you have accused; not all of you, but some. Only vaguely has he heard the charges brought against him, and since there can be no steady answer to vague rumor, it is our will that you who have aught to say speak, and that the knight shall answer you. You who listen"—and she swept her arm round to include every upturned face in the hall—"you who listen give a patient hearing. We seek not to guide you; but be honest men, not fools of passion to be led by every one who tries to move you; be Drussenlanders, not wretches making our street corners dangerous, men ready to creep in the dark and stab from behind. I have gloried in that I am your Princess, gloried in the brave hearts I rule, gloried in your deeds; have been proud to cry to the whole world that I am a Princess in Drussenland; but show me that you are cravens, men afraid to meet their enemy face to face, and I will fling this golden circle of my sovereignty amongst you. Make whom you will your ruler. I should think it shame to call such men my subjects."

For a moment there was silence, then a murmur ran through the hall, and then a great roar. She had touched them. Dexterously she had paved the way for me.

"You, our priests, have somewhat against the knight," she said, when the shouting had ceased,

“and you, our loyal knights. Speak honestly; and you, Sir Verrall, answer honestly. So justice shall be done.”

She looked first at the chief of the priests, then at Count Vasca, and then at me.

The priest began to speak in a rather sing-song tone, as though he were reciting a lesson he had committed to memory. He was a hypocrite, and I doubt if he had ever believed me to be the expected Knight. He had accepted me as a foil to Vasca's power; but since I had usurped his power, in that I had saved the prisoners, he was determined to bring me to ruin. He talked much of his duty to the religion of the land, much of his loyalty to the Princess, the rightful sovereign of the country, much of his sorrow that one so highly favored as I should so err in my duty.

“The expected Knight was to do many things in Drussenland,” he went on. “He was to bring peace and plenty into it. That he should be mighty in achievement, I believed; but with that I have nothing to do. My office hinders me from wielding a sword, and though my heart may leap at the sight of brave deeds, I can have no part in them. My office is to watch over the sacred things of this land, to punish those who bring our great religion into disrepute, giving occasion to those of lesser intellect to revile and turn the God we worship into a jest. We have laws that have come down to us from the beginning, laws given us to obey. It is not for us to question them. It is for us to fulfil them. One such law the knight has, with persuasive tongue, caused your Highness to break. For the knight I care nothing. Be he ever so courageous, he is but a unit in this land of ours, and, if need be, can be swept away

as a cobweb which disgraces a beautiful structure is destroyed. It is for the structure I care, for our country which has its crown in the person of your Highness. Your Highness has broken a law, and, therefore, your people have broken a law. Think you peace and plenty shall be poured into the laps of those who sin? I rejoiced at the Knight's coming, so is my sorrow keener that he has made his mission of none effect. For him punishment awaits at the hand of Him who sent him. Our duty is not to delay his going. If it be so willed that as he came miraculously, so miraculously can he be taken from us, then it shall be. But death is the only means we mortals know of by which he can return. Therefore, by death should we seek pardon for ourselves. I would my words could take a happier tone. If my eyes are blinded, if I have not read our laws aright, then power will be granted to the knight to increase my wisdom. I wish not to condemn him unheard. It is not I that condemn him—it is our religion which does so.”

To me his argument was not a very convincing one, but it was impossible to tell what effect his words would have upon his hearers. No shouting followed their utterance. The condemnation was of too solemn a nature. The Princess turned to Vasca.

“For my own part, I had rather remain silent,” he said. “It may seem envious in me to seek to condemn a knight who in tournament has met me honestly, and in the field has fought valiantly. Indeed, I speak only for the many as chief of the knights who attend your Highness.”

“That we know, Sir Vasca,” said the Princess, looking fixedly at him.

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She did not take her eyes from him while he spoke. Perhaps he saw distrust in them, for, after beginning so humbly, he went on bitterly enough—

“The priest has spoken of the laws; with them I have nothing to do, but since the priests and I have been often at variance, in that we are agreed in this matter proves the justice of our complaint. The knight was to accomplish two things with which I am concerned—to place your Highness on the throne in Yadasara, and to find a treasure that should bring plenty to our land. I blame not that these things are not yet accomplished, but that nothing has been done. I have no knowledge of miracles; they are for the priests. I am a blunt soldier who believes in a man carving out his own miracles with the edge of his sword, and as a soldier it seems to me that in due time the conquest of Yadasara can be accomplished. Knights to fight there are in plenty. We need no stranger knight to lead us against the city. But in finding the treasure is the chief mission of the expected Knight. We are at present a divided country, and whichever side finds the treasure wins also the throne in Yadasara. These foreign dogs the King has brought into this land would leave him to-morrow were they paid for doing so, and there are hundreds of men in this city who would march to Yadasara to-morrow were the treasure in the King’s hands. The priests believe that our men fight because of the righteousness of the cause, but I go in and out the camp daily, and I know what murmurings there are. It is no secret that the King never rests in seeking for this treasure, and I have little faith in the loyalty of a body of men if, by chance, their interests pull another way. Do you suppose that half the men

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without these walls care who reigns in Yadasara, so long as their own wants are satisfied? The time is ripe to win or to lose, for success or rebellion. They expected much of Sir Verrall's coming; they believe they are doomed to disappointment, therefore they cry out. To expect greatly and to be disappointed makes men wretches, lurking at the street corners, and though, as a true Drussenlander, I have no pity for those who attacked the knight when he stood your Highness's sentinel, still I affirm that he has only himself to blame. If he is the expected Knight, let him fulfil his mission; if not, let him answer for the lie which made us give him welcome."

A murmur of approbation sounded through the hall. Then all eyes turned towards me. It was difficult not to appear disconcerted, knowing how much depended upon me, but I think I succeeded in maintaining a worthy bearing, and I found courage in the look that was in the Princess's eyes as she turned to me.

"I am accused of breaking a law, or of causing your Highness to break it," I said. "It is true. That I succeeded, though with difficulty, as you, who heard me make my petition, know well, is the greatest good I have accomplished since I have been in Drussenland."

An angry growl came from the crowd, and I felt that in the priest's accusation lay my greatest danger.

"I will tell you why. Your priest said if he had judged amiss, I should have power to increase his wisdom. That power I have, I wish him power to understand; and not only the priest, but all you who hear me. From whence I came you do not know.

You have a legend which you look to be fulfilled, and at my coming you welcomed me. Think you fulfilment comes exactly as men expect? You know it does not in the matters of daily life; why should it in those greater matters which link the present with the past, and both with the future? The priests have wisdom, and they prophesy, but I came into Drussenland from a more enlightened country, where the wisdom of your priests would be but as the idle prattling of a child. I tell you that the Great God hates the law which I caused to be broken. Men's lives are dear to Him. Would you, who are fathers, slay the children you love because you found them disobedient? This law of yours, that prisoners of war shall be slain, was framed when men knew little of Him they worshipped. This He bids me tell you, that to kill men as you would kill your prisoners is murder. Those who obey that law may call themselves true Drussenlanders, but they are not doing the will of the God they pretend to worship. In that the priests prophesy disaster to this land because that law is broken, they err most grievously. I prophesy peace for this land if you let mercy rule you rather than vengeance. Would you love your Princess if her hand were always ready to punish? She has mercy, therefore you love her; and yet to those who are your prisoners you show no mercy. I fear nothing of what you can do to me. Death; what is it? A moment in time that sends me to a life of rest. But I have a mission, as every true man has, and if in living I cannot fulfil it, it shall be fulfilled in dying. Your swords may leap to slay me, but I shall not die until my appointed time. That is my answer to your priests. They err from ignorance. I have been given

power to speak wisdom to them. Let them beware how they shut their ears to the voice that speaks the truth."

I paused and waited anxiously, wondering if I had said enough. I had spoken from my heart, and as I spoke, I do not think my own safety was uppermost in my mind. It was no lie to declare I had a mission if words of mine could break a barbarous law. There was a low murmur. How easy it is to sway a mob by bold speech. Men turned to whisper to each other. I had impressed them. But the priests scowled darkly. It was proof enough that they dreaded the effect of my words.

"Count Vasca's accusation is of a different kind. I have not yet placed your Princess on the throne in Yadasara. I have not yet found the treasure hidden in this land. But he has made a graver accusation, not against me, but against you. What men are they who hold loyalty so lightly, who care so little who reigns over them, who grumble so loudly, and who would so readily march to Yadasara to fight against her Highness? Who are they? Speak. In her Highness's name, I promise pardon to any man who confesses to disloyalty. No answer? What, are we so strangely divided that in this hall only loyal subjects find a place? Are all the murmurers without? Remember, the Count accused you—not I. I have fought beside some of you, I have witnessed many of you do gallantly. I have more faith in you than the Count has."

And then, turning quickly to the Princess, I added—

"These are honest men, your Highness, but they feared to contradict your kinsman."

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The rafters rang again. I had become an orator to some purpose.

"You see, Count Vasca, you were mistaken," I said, turning to him with a smile.

He did not speak.

"Also are you mistaken, it seems, in saying that no leader is wanted to accomplish the conquest of Yadasara. If that is true, why has the city not already fallen? Why, when the enemy fled across the river the other day, were we not led to follow them? You are a soldier—you know why. The time was not ripe. It would have been to court defeat. We knew not at what point the city was least defended. Neither is the time ripe for the finding of the treasure, but it ripens."

"Any knight could speak so. We expect deeds, not words, from Sir Verrall," he answered.

"You have forced me to words. The King has caused his captains to search for the treasure. Even when I came into Drussenland, a captain, he who is now my servant, was seeking for certain signs in the mountains. If such a treasure were to be found by signs, think you it would be a knight's mission to find it? Would it not be the mission of a man of study, cunning in the reading of strange writing? Mark you not"—and I spoke to those in the hall—"mark you not how the two things go together? To set the Princess on the throne in Yadasara, and to find a treasure. At the sword's point must one be accomplished. Is it not the sword's point which shall unlock the hiding-place of the other? Your treasure lies hidden where only knightly deeds can win it. Your treasure is valueless until the foreigner is driven from the land. Where think you a treasure

would most likely lie in Drussenland? Where but in the greatest stronghold the land contains—in the fortress of Yadasara?"

Again the rafters rang. The knights shouted as good knights will shout at the promise of conflict. Even the priests forgot to scowl, and listened.

"Here are swords in plenty. Lead us to victory!" So the knights shouted, and I knew that the greatest danger was over.

"I will do more," I said. "Three days hence I will go to Yadasara. I will enter the city, and spy out its weakness; that is, if her Highness gives me leave."

The Count's lip curled.

"You will not return," he said.

"I shall, Count Vasca. I shall return to lead loyal men to victory."

He dared not curse me, for the Princess was watching, leaning forward to listen.

I turned to face the now excited crowd. I spread out my arms and I cried to them.

"Sir Knights, loyal men of Drussenland, have I answered my accusers? Shout your trust in me, or if there is no trust, see here I stand unarmed—draw your weapons and slay me."

A moment's silence, and then such shouts that those who hated me must have trembled. Without the shouts were taken up, and the streets rang with my name. I had played a bold game. It had served me well. I had won.

CHAPTER XIX

TWO WOMEN AND TWO PARTINGS

THE crowd, each man shouting and talking excitedly with his neighbor, pressed eagerly towards the doors, as though each individual in it were anxious to be the first to bear tidings to those without. I doubt not that, before those tidings had been passed many times from lip to lip, it was a strange piece of news that was imparted. Probably it was declared that the Knight of the Silver Star knew that the treasure was hidden in the fortress of Yadasara, and that three days hence he was going thither to fetch it. I certainly had promised them a great deal, but not so much as that. I had swayed the masses for the moment, at any rate. I could not tell so easily what measure of success I had had with those gathered about me on the platform.

We did not move until the Princess had risen, which she did almost immediately. There was a flush upon her face as she retired, I could read in it a look of triumph, but I think no one else there could tell whether she was pleased or not at the turn things had taken. The moment the curtains had fallen behind her, the priests moved away in procession, their chief looking at me for a moment almost as if I had increased his wisdom; but he left me without speaking. Then several knights, my friends, gathered

round me. I had their good-will, but I noted that I had not converted a single one who was avowedly opposed to me. They crossed to Count Vasca, and he smiled. So we stood in two parties upon the platform.

"The rabble is easily moved, Sir Verrall," he said contemptuously.

"Most easily," I answered, smiling even as he did. "Else had they not been moved to listen to my accusers!"

"Another puff of wind, and they will turn again even as a loose straw turns in the street. Your words will one day trip you, Sir Verrall, if you let them so outrun your deeds."

"The people will not readily forget that Count Vasca has accused them of disloyalty," I returned. "I warrant they are not all pleasant looks which await you in the city. For the rest, Time shall judge between us."

"And if Time tarries in his judgment, Sir Verrall, I am quite prepared to hurry him," said Vasca, touching the hilt of his sword. "You have traded long enough upon the advantage a stumbling steed gave you, and my courtesy to a foeman who was a stranger amongst us."

He passed down the steps and across the hall, followed by more than half the knights who had stood round the Princess.

"The people shouted 'Sir Verrall,' but not all," said a knight beside me. "You may have lessened the number of your enemies, but others are only the more incensed against you. The streets grow dark. We will go with you to your quarters."

"I thank you, gentlemen. I would willingly keep my life a little, since I have so much to do in it."

Several soldiers were at the lower end of the hall, and some others still hung about the entrance. I noticed no one particularly. From a shadow, however, a lady stepped suddenly—the Lady Aldrida.

"By your leave, I would speak with Sir Verrall."

Some about me seemed disinclined to give way, perhaps understanding her better than I did; but as I stopped and smiled, they fell back out of earshot. I had not perceived Lady Aldrida during the council—indeed, had not thought of her. I was not pleased to see her now, for an explanation of my conduct was yet unspoken. She came close to me, and there was that in her face that made me look at her hands. They were empty, hanging at her side.

"Is it true?" she said.

"Is what true?"

"That you would be a king in Drussenland?"

"Who knows? I may be some woman's king, if not in Drussenland, in some other country."

"You do not answer me. I will have an answer. You have given me the right to demand it."

"A man usually finds it easy to answer a pretty woman," I returned, though I saw very plainly that I might find it difficult enough.

"Indeed, if my memory be of any worth at all, you have found it easy enough to question a woman, and if what is said be true, easy enough to deceive her most foully."

"I am well accused to-day, it seems."

"And shall not come out of this as you have come out of the other," she answered fiercely. "Pleasing

words will not avail you. Is it true that while you have pledged yourself to me, you have sought to wed the Princess Daria?"

"Who has told you such a tale?"

"You may hear it whispered at every corner. Eyes may see even into the garden of the Princess."

For a moment I had no answer. That what had happened between the Princess and myself should be known, even in the slightest degree, was startling.

"Rumor whispers curiously."

"And truly? Is it so?"

I had spent many a long hour in wondering how I should explain to Lady Aldrida. Now, in a moment, I was brought face to face with the situation, and there was no getting away from it.

"Whatever rumor may whisper concerning her Highness, it is well not to credit overmuch," I answered slowly. "Prying eyes ever see more than there is to be seen, and lack of knowledge breeds much imagination."

"Words, words!" she exclaimed. "I want the truth."

"Your imagination has run some riot, too," I said, for her manner stung me. Conscience may make a coward of a man, but if conscience pricks too sharply, it makes him cruel as well. "I thought there was friendship between us. I so intended it."

"Friendship!"

"Indeed I thought so. I would be as the many others who admire your wit and beauty. It would seem you expected more of me?"

"Then you spoke falsely, pledged falsely, and laughed at my surrender."

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"I had no thought of surrender, fair lady, since there was no grave intention to besiege. I looked for pleasant company, and swear I found it."

"A truce to falsehood. You looked for more than pleasant company then; it is only now you wish for less."

"I sought and found, as others have done," I answered.

"We spoke of those others," she answered. "You bid me smile no more on any but yourself, and I consented."

"Truly our friendship was very good just then, for, as I made request, so you answered it, as surely you have answered such requests before."

Of course I might write volumes to excuse myself to dispassionate judgment, and in the end fail miserably to lift a particle of blame from my shoulders. I had not besieged in grave earnest, but I had overstepped the rubicon of friendship. She called me false, and I cannot deny that she had reason. Still, being directly accused, I could not help setting up some defence, and though, I fear, the defence was little to my credit, and the manner of it somewhat brutal, there was no choice left me.

She looked straight into my eyes for a minute—a long minute it seemed, for I was ashamed of myself.

"You shall regret the friendship, Sir Verrall," she said slowly. "You may escape the swords of your enemies; but I will so contrive that you shall not escape my vengeance. It is a dangerous thing to play with such a woman as I am."

She moved away from me, and the knights came to my side again.

She laughed bitterly.

"Guard him well, gentlemen, if you would keep him. I do not envy you so false a friend."

There was dignity in her speech, and the grace of an angered queen in her departing.

I smiled, as a man does who feels ashamed of himself, and wishes to hide his confusion.

"It seems you have made an enemy," said Walen.

"Unfortunately; and just when I most need friends."

I made a gesture to include all who were with me; but I think some of them looked askance at me. Such beauty as Lady Aldrida's is a powerful weapon, and the hearts of many of them were young. It did me an ill turn to be called a false friend, even with those who at present supported me.

"And it is not only I who want friends," I went on, speaking chiefly to Walen, who I thought was most attached to me. "I turned Count Vasca's words against him; but I fear there was some truth in them. The Princess may need strong arms to defend her, and whoever may prove disloyal, we of this company are true."

"As steel," they answered in chorus.

"The safety of the Princess is of great moment to me; for I fear it is through me that danger to her exists. She has done much to protect me, and the fact may weigh against her. I shall not be at hand to take my part in watching over her, but I know she is safe with my comrades."

So I sought to put them upon a stricter guard, and to ensure the safety of my beloved in my absence. For mine she was, although her lips had not yet told me so.

We were leaving the hall when Jasar met us. Two of the Princess's guards were with him.

"Her Highness commands your presence, Sir Ver-rall," he said.

"Her Highness thinks I need protection," I said to my comrades. "It will save you the trouble of seeing me to my quarters. We are of one mind, is it not so? Each one of us holds his life as naught beside the safety of the Princess."

Every sword was drawn a space from its scabbard, and then sent home again with reassuring music.

I turned, and went with Jasar through the hall and along the maze of corridors which led to the secret entrance to the Princess's apartment. I noted that one of the guards who followed us was the same who had led me that way before. The other was one who was most constantly the Princess's messenger. I was relieved to find that she did not entrust her secrets to many.

The priest and I entered.

The Princess was alone, and rose to meet me. I would have knelt to kiss her hand, but she would not let me. I raised her hand to my lips as I stood instead.

"It was bravely done; but why put off your going for three days?" she asked.

"Are you so anxious for me to be gone?"

"Nay; but three days is a long time. Much may happen in it."

"I had almost hoped that much might happen," I answered softly.

She looked at me, and then her eyes fell. I have ever understood that it is a good sign with women.

"You led me to hope so when we parted last night," I said. "I made a confession which I shall never make to any other woman. I grant it might have angered you, yet it seemed not to do so."

"Indeed, I was not angry."

"And now?"

"Now I think only of your safety, though I doubt whether you are not going to greater danger in Yadasara. But three days give opportunity to your enemies. They could watch for you. You must not wait. You must go to-night."

I looked out into the garden. It was dark, and there were clouds which allowed the moon to shine only at fitful intervals.

"To-night, but not till midnight. I have sent word to your servant, and he will meet you here. Within your prison"—and she pointed to the room where I had been nursed so tenderly—"you will find a peasant's dress. Your man O'Ryan says that so it will be safest for you to go, and I trust his wit. Jasar, send one of the guards to attend the Knight. Return quickly, Sir Verrall, for midnight will not be long in coming."

I was not long in returning to her, dressed in my peasant's garb, but I retained my sword. Jasar did not come back to the Princess with me. The priest had quick understanding, for which I was duly thankful.

"Sit by me," she said. "I would not let you go if there were any other way. But there is none, for the door which leads to the world beyond is a secret one."

"But if I find the key?"

"If it is the only way open, I——"

"Yes?"

"You may ask me again if I will come."

I suppose I was foolish, but something held me back from putting my arm round her. Perchance it was the peasant's dress.

"Be sure I shall not return to that other world alone."

She let her hand rest lightly on my arm, but I fancied there was a soft caress in it.

"And be sure I shall think well before I answer. Ah, no, do not speak; words will not convince me. I have had leisure to note how much value there is in words."

"You are thinking of the Lady Aldrida?"

She smiled.

"Perhaps. Is it strange, since you loved her first?"

"I never loved her. It was your treatment of me that made me seem to. Your cold reception stung me, although I had no right to expect any other, and when a man loves he grows desperate. You cared nothing for me, and, fool that I was, I tried to make you believe that I cared nothing for you."

"And, in truth, you succeeded."

"Why did you receive me so coldly? I looked for gladness in your eyes after the tournament."

"I had a secret to keep."

"Even then?" I asked.

"The Princess could have smiled, the woman dared not. I was afraid of you, of myself, of all the world."

"Do you still doubt me?"

"I am waiting to be convinced."

"Lady Aldrida came to me after the council, and

accused me of being false," I said. "She spoke most bitterly."

"And you soothed her?"

"I fear not. I told her that imagination had played too great a part with her, and that I had said no more to her than many others had done, and will do again to so pretty a lady. To be called pretty did not console her, which astonished me."

"She may have a heart, Sir Verrall."

"I never sought to rob her of it, although she seems to think so. I regret that I said so much; but it was said carelessly."

"And she left you amicably?"

"No—vowing vengeance."

The Princess started.

"She cannot harm me," I said. "To-day has proved my friends, and they have sworn to protect your Highness."

"I have no fear. What do you fear for me?"

"Because I love you, I fear all things. Do you know that it is whispered in the city that I seek to become a king in Drussenland?"

"Who whispers it?"

"I know not who started it, but I heard it when I first entered the hall to-day; and Lady Aldrida had heard it, for she said prying eyes might look into even the Princess's garden."

She turned sharply as if expecting to find that we were being watched now.

"Count Vasca desired to see your Highness last night, you will remember?"

She was thoughtful for some time, and I did not interrupt her.

"It is well that you go to-night," she said suddenly.

"You regret what you said last night?" I asked. "Perhaps, for your sake, it would be well if I did not return."

"I do not regret. I have said you must return." I could not answer her, for Jasar entered.

"All is in readiness, your Highness."

"We will come. Leave us a moment. You will depart by a secret way, Sir Verrall, by a door which opens into the woods that touch the outer walls. The woods lie along the spur of the hill, so that you will pass the camp unnoticed. Two good horses await you, and for the rest your wit must serve. Go warily, for my sake. It may chance that it would be convenient to return secretly; there is the key."

She gave me the key, and I slipped it into the pouch at my waist.

"You trust me?" I said.

"In all that a gallant knight can do."

Her hand was in mine, and so we stood looking into each other's eyes.

"Will you believe me when I say I love you, and only you?"

She did not answer.

"Once you angrily reclaimed the handkerchief I thought you had given me. Will you give me your handkerchief now?"

"Must you have something for remembrance?"

"Not for remembrance, but when I return and show the token, and make an humble petition, you, perchance, may grant it."

Her handkerchief was in my hand.

"The next time I petition it shall be for myself," I said.

"I think——" she began, and the clasp of our hands tightened, and her arm touched mine, and her hair brushed my cheek. "I think—I fear I shall easily grant that request. Go warily. Come, claim it quickly."

Eye to eye, heart to heart were we almost. Her face was raised to mine. I questioned her with a look, and how she answered I hardly know. But she did answer, for my arms stole round her, and our lips met. A warm glow came into her face, a lovelight into her eyes, almost a sob into her breath. It was a sweet surrender. It was a moment of delirious triumph for me. Then it was gone. Very gently she disengaged herself from my embrace.

"Now go," she said.

CHAPTER XX

IN THE ENEMY'S COUNTRY

I LEFT her. No word could be spoken after such a farewell. In an outer room Jasar and O'Ryan were waiting for me.

"We will go at once," said the priest.

O'Ryan and I followed him from the room and down endless corridors and passages. I tried to mark particularly our direction, for the Princess had said that it might be well that I should return secretly. It was difficult, for although Jasar carried a torch, it burned badly.

Presently he stopped and knocked out the torch.

"The moon must serve for the rest," he said. "The light of a torch might be seen too far through the trees."

He fitted a key into a lock. It turned with a rusty sound, and a small door—so small that I had to bend low to pass through—swung open. Without it was almost as dark as within, for the woods touched the walls, and the door was most cunningly hid.

"Are we outside the city?" I asked.

"Yes. Come this way."

He led us a score of yards from the secret entrance, and there was one of the Princess's guards with two horses. We mounted at once.

"You can guess something of my secret?" I said,

bending down towards the priest, so that neither the soldier nor O'Ryan should hear.

"All," he answered.

"It does not displease you?"

"It pleases her Highness. I have no right to be displeased, even had I the will."

"My good friend, you will watch over her?"

"Though I am not a warrior, my life stands between her and danger. I can say, I can give, no more."

"It suffices," I answered.

"Keep well under the city walls until you come beneath the tower yonder, showing faintly through that opening in the trees. A path turns sharply into the woods there—follow it; you will cross the spur of the lower hills, and be hidden from the camp. By daylight you should be well on your way across the open country. Keep silent until you have left the woods behind you. There is mettle in your horses. Farewell, my son, and Godspeed!"

I raised my cap, and O'Ryan and I moved forwards. We found the path easily enough, and turned into the woods, but we let our horses go at walking pace, and choose their own steps, for although the way was distinct, it was narrow and very rough. It was a steady incline, too, for a long distance, for we were mounting the spur of the hill. Clouds were racing over the moon, and even had it shone brightly it would have been of little service to us, for the trees were very thick overhead. The air was intensely clear, and when we reached the top of the spur we could distinctly hear the challenge of a sentry in the camp below us. Involuntarily we reined in our horses, but the challenge had nothing to do with us.

Neither of us spoke, and we went on again. The rubbing of our legs upon the saddles sounded loud in the silence, and the jingle of a bit at intervals seemed perilous. We proceeded on the level for some distance, and then the path dipped. It was a steep descent, and we had much work to keep our horses on their feet. But the trees gradually thinned, and presently we emerged from the wood.

O'Ryan stood for a few moments taking his bearings.

"Straight before us, Verrall," he whispered. "We'll put as much ground behind us as possible before dawn."

At the shaking of the reins our horses broke into a steady canter, and we pressed forwards upon as perilous a mission as men could well undertake. For a long time we did not speak.

"How long will it take us?" I asked presently.

"There's some rough country between this and Yadasara, and we'll have to go carefully at daylight. With luck we shall be in the city soon after it is well awake."

"Shall we get into the city?"

"Yes, we shall get in."

"As free men, I mean?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"With luck," he said. "You oughtn't to object to the reservation, for you're a believer in luck."

Was I? I am afraid I was beginning to think that success was due to my personal talents and courage. A woman's extreme favor cannot but make a man think well of himself.

"You know why I am going to Yadasara, I suppose?" I said presently.

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“Faith, because the other place has got too hot to hold you.”

“I still have a mission.”

“The same one?” he asked.

“Yes. I shall return and attempt to lead the Princess’s forces against Yadasara.”

“And the treasure-finding comes afterwards, I presume?” said O’Ryan.

“Precisely.”

“It’s a mighty pretty programme, but it’ll want some doing. I doubt not we’ll get into the city somehow, but we shall not get out of it so easily. You’ll not find women with keys to back doors there.”

His sneer annoyed me, but I would not take offence.

“We’re something in the nature of spies, I take it?” he said presently.

“I don’t like the word, but it comes to that,” I answered.

“It’s a pretty warm corner I’ll be in, if it is found out. You naturally didn’t give that a thought.”

“Nonsense, man. The danger is equal for both of us.”

“I’m going through with it, you need have no fear, but if the danger is equal, the punishment is not likely to be the same. However, let it pass.”

“There is something else I want to discover in Yadasara,” I said.

“What is that?”

“The way out of Drussenland.”

He laughed.

“You’ve overburdened yourself, Verrall. Drop a bit of the load, man, and you’ll ride lighter. Besides——”

"Well?"

"If you get the Princess crowned, you won't want to leave her."

"Perhaps not."

"And if you did, she wouldn't let you go."

"I thought I had not been a prominent subject in the conversation you had with the Princess?"

"That was on the first occasion," he answered. "I've had another talk with her since then."

"When?"

"Last night, a few hours before we started."

"And she spoke of me?"

"Well, yes; she intimated that if any harm happened to you in Yadasara it would be as well for me not to see her again."

"And you took an oath, of course?"

"She has a way of commanding, as if she were asking a favor."

"And you are going to keep it?"

"To this extent, at any rate—I shall not go back to her without you."

I did not tell him what had passed between the Princess and myself, but I suppose he guessed somewhere near the truth. We did not talk much more for a time, for the ground was heavy, and our horses wanted considerable attention.

At the first streak of dawn we stopped to rest the animals at a stream, and found comfort in a drink of wine from a flask O'Ryan had provided himself with. When we resumed the journey, we kept by the woods, which were plentiful, as much as possible, and we went slowly, as O'Ryan said it was no good getting to Yadasara before the King was up.

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Presently, away on our right, I saw the great rock rising up in the light of the early morning.

"We can go slowly, and get close to the bridge before they see us. We don't want them to have too long a time to think what questions they will ask us. Of course, we've got to be guided by circumstances; but I'm going on this line. I shall just tell the truth about your coming into Drussenland, no fairy tale about a long-expected Knight; they don't hold with such things in Yadasara. Then we were taken prisoners, and since then you and I have been doing our best to get away. If they believe it, well and good; if they don't, we'll just have to stand and take a hand in any game they choose to play. One piece of advice; if it's a case of going to the fortress, or getting killed in an unequal combat, get killed. It will save you a lot of trouble."

"I might escape from the fortress," I said.

"You would be the first man to do it, so it's not a hopeful chance. There is a way out; but it's only dead men take it."

The sun rose higher. O'Ryan reined in his horse. We were hidden in the wood.

"From here, we'll make straight for the bridge. See, it is yonder, and they keep a sharp watch. Ride leisurely. One thing more. Remember, you're not a knight, you're just a humble soldier of fortune, willing to serve the King for what pay he can afford to promise you; and remember, I am a captain in the King's army, and a little deference would be a good thing."

He laughed, as if the changing of our positions were an excellent joke.

"You might call me captain pretty often. You can very well do it in that dress, and the more importance I can show, the better for our enterprise and safety. Now come."

I followed him at a canter towards the bridge. We pulled up half-a-dozen yards from the sentries who challenged us.

"Where's the captain of your guard? I want to speak with him," said O'Ryan.

"Have you the password?"

"No. How is it possible, when I have chiefly been spending my time in prison yonder? Do you know any one of the name of Dennis O'Ryan?"

"Never heard of him."

I smiled. The answer was so prompt.

"So much for fame," said O'Ryan. "Call your captain and ask him."

But the captain, hearing the altercation, came out, followed by half-a-dozen troopers, from a small building at the other end of the bridge. The river was not so wide at this point as it was by the city.

"What is it?" he called, as he came.

"Faith, here's two blockheads swearing they don't know Dennis O'Ryan—Captain Dennis O'Ryan. You know him well enough, if you're Costa, and you should be by your face."

"O'Ryan!" he exclaimed. "Why, aren't you dead? Everybody said you were, so you ought to be."

"Everybody's wrong; though why I'm not dead is more than I can tell. I'm from prison. They finished the troop I set out with, but I've brought back a recruit who'll count for something. But let the story wait. I'll tell it to the King."

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"You were always good at telling tales, O'Ryan, but the King will be hungry before he swallows this one."

"He'll be mighty satisfied when he has thoroughly digested it, anyway. May we pass these blockheads who have never so much as heard of Dennis O'Ryan?"

"They'll hear enough of him presently, no doubt," said Costa, with a leer. "How he's been in prison, and how he was let out to fight against his former comrades."

O'Ryan muttered an oath, saying underneath his breath—

"I thought only one man recognized me."

"Dismount, and throw down your arms, and you can cross the bridge."

"You'll bring me to the King?"

"I wouldn't rob him of your tale for the world," was the answer. "I'll send forward and ask at what hour he'll receive you."

"That's courteous of you, but you Spaniards were ever that," said O'Ryan. Then he whispered to me: "It's our best chance, and, anyway, we'll enter the city, somehow."

He got off his horse, and threw down his sword. I followed his example.

"Keep them safely; we had a deal of trouble in stealing them. A fine recruit this, Costa. He should assure me the King's favor."

We crossed the bridge, surrounded by the soldiers, and entered the small building on the other side.

"I'll send to the King, and you can rest here, and make up your tale until the messenger returns. I

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wouldn't trouble about the tale overmuch, for like as not you'll never have a chance of telling it."

"And why not?"

"The King may command your immediate removal to the fortress."

"Then, by Saint Patrick, I'll tell the tale to you as we go there."

CHAPTER XXI

I TRY MY STRENGTH WITH THE KING

KNOWING well that if there was one place capable of inspiring O'Ryan with fear, it was the fortress, I could not help admiring his manner of answering Costa. If the sleek, well-fed Spaniard imagined that he was going to weaken the courage of the Irishman he was much mistaken. O'Ryan's heart might be trembling, but he was the last man in the world to betray himself.

"They have plenty of cures for talkative tongues yonder," said Costa.

"I know it. I was present when one of your countrymen found that out," O'Ryan answered. "Faith, he squealed like—like——"

"You needn't talk of it. It's unpleasant."

"By Saint Patrick, you're right, comrade. He found it so, I warrant. He's done little talking since then."

"He's dead," said Costa.

"Lucky man. He doesn't miss his tongue."

The tip of the Spaniard's tongue just showed travelling from one corner of his mouth to the other, as though he were anxious to make sure that it was in its place.

"You're not pleasant company when you speak so," he said, with a gesture of disgust. "I'll leave

you to prepare your tale. You may as well occupy yourself, and I hope you'll have a chance of telling it, for I bear you no ill-will. Guards are at the door, remember. You had best fit yourself to circumstances."

"Your guards may go to sleep if they will," answered O'Ryan. "They'll find me here when they wake. I came to see the King, and I shall not go without seeing him."

Costa smiled as he left us, and his smile and O'Ryan's little narrative made me think of the Inquisition. I do not wish to air any little insular prejudices I may have, but I know of no smile so calculated to make one feel cold in the back as a Spaniard's.

O'Ryan did not attempt to deceive me. We looked at each other for the space of a minute.

"I'd run, if they took my advice and went to sleep," he said.

"We've been in tighter places," I returned.

"Sure, I don't remember them. I wonder what other blackguard saw me at the bridge that day. That fight's been on my conscience ever since. It's like to spoil the best fairy tale I can put my tongue to."

"I would have the tale ready, at any rate."

"If I have a chance of telling it, the tale sha'n't fail for lack of resource; but it's an eight-foot cabin with an invalid mother in one corner, and a pig making up his mind which he'd take of the other three that I'd exchange for the whole of Yadasara at this minute. There are points about the confined space and atmosphere of an eight-foot cabin at times."

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"Don't get down-hearted, man; think of Bridget."

"The thought of her is not the consolation you might expect, Verrall. You see, whether I think of her or not won't prevent them screwing the life out of me in the fortress yonder if their pleasure happens to turn that way."

"It won't be so bad as that, I hope."

"You may hope; but there's no certainty. If the King's in a good humor, we may pull through; if he isn't, well——"

"Yes?" I said interrogatively.

"Better not ask. Anticipation lets the courage out of a man as effectually as a hole lets the wine out of a cask."

"What is the worst we may expect?"

"Dying in bits—the very worst way of dying I know of."

"No market-place?" I asked.

"That's dying altogether. I said in bits. Let me think of my tale."

He leaned back upon his bench, and I knew he was thinking by his frequent muttered oaths and low growls. I also got into as comfortable a position as possible, and thought of Daria. My looks would perhaps have betrayed me had there been any one to observe, but I spoke no words, not even in a whisper.

O'Ryan suddenly sprang up. His ears were keener than mine.

The door opened, and Costa entered.

"Well?" questioned O'Ryan. "Is it the palace or the fortress?"

"You're to have the chance of telling your tale" was the answer.

"At once?"

"Yes. Haven't you made it up yet?"

"Man, I'm just bursting to tell it. I'll speak of your courtesy favorably to the King. I never forget a friend or an enemy. Tell me, did the King sleep well and breakfast well?"

"I heard nothing to the contrary," Costa answered. "Why?"

"It's poor work telling a tale to a sleepy, half-fed man, be he a king or a—a Spanish captain," answered O'Ryan. "Come now, weren't you sleepy and hungry when you suggested such unpleasant possibilities to me a little while ago?"

"I had not breakfasted."

"That accounts for everything. Take us to the palace. A word in your ear. You have noticed my recruit? Tell any man you're particularly fond of not to meddle with him. There's not a man in Yadasara so powerful, and once roused, and with a sword in his hand, he'd wipe out a small army. I know—I've seen him at work. I'll tell you a tale or two about him over a tankard after sundown."

"That's a bargain, so long as you're not in the fortress by that time," the Spaniard answered.

"You've breakfasted, man; let's have no more miserable anticipations." Then O'Ryan turned to me and said sharply: "Here."

This peremptory summons was not at all to my liking, and I was inclined to take no notice of it. I had done the commanding for so long that being commanded was not pleasant. However, with a mental note to privately put O'Ryan in his place at the first opportunity, I went to him.

"What is it, Captain?"

“Put your arm up and show your muscle.”

This was too much, and I did not obey. I felt inclined to exhibit my muscle in a manner O’Ryan would not care about.

“A bit sullen at times; all these strong men are,” O’Ryan said, with a slight wink at me.

“We flog for sullenness in Yadasara.”

I made a short step forward, and smiled to see how nimbly the fat Spaniard jumped back. Fear overcame his corpulency in a marvellous manner.

“Don’t make him angry, you fool!” said O’Ryan, and then, as he caught hold of my arm and pressed it slightly: “Come, show your muscle, and Captain Costa won’t talk any more about flogging.”

So I rolled up my sleeve, taking care not to roll it far enough to allow the short arms of my coat of mail to be seen, and slowly bending my arm I let the Spaniard put his hand upon the knotted muscle. His eyes opened, and he stepped out of my reach.

“A good recruit, eh?” said O’Ryan.

“If his courage equals his muscle, yes.”

“His muscle’s just a child’s compared to his courage. Warn your friends that this young fellow is a dangerous plaything.”

Costa nodded, and we followed him out of the building.

I have said that the gates of the city were at the angles at the base of the triangle, as it were, and, surrounded by half-a-dozen men-at-arms, we were marched under the walls to the northern gate. Towards the river the city was impregnable, I think, even against the heaviest of modern guns, for its foundations were solid rock; but the lower end of the city was on a level with the plain, and there, there

were only the walls to protect it. Still they were solid enough for all the engines of war that were known in Drussenland. I took as much notice of everything as possible, not knowing when my knowledge might serve me. So we passed into Yadasara, and except to the few men gathered at the gate, we attracted little notice. The city was busy, and neither men nor women gave us more than a casual glance. They were too used to strangers to look upon a man with fair hair as a Heaven-sent messenger.

It was a long march, and the streets were of the roughest in the lower city. They improved somewhat as we ascended towards the upper part. Before us the rock rose, the fortress grimly crowning its summit, quite isolated it seemed, for I could see no path to it.

We turned presently into a wide square; massive buildings on three sides of it, and the square was alive with soldiers and knights. Here we came to a halt, and O'Ryan looked around on the chance of recognizing friends, but they had either forgotten him, or he was out of favor. His face assumed a solemn expression. He evidently had grave doubts regarding our success, and I saw him glance up towards the fortress.

Costa left us, but returned in a few moments, and motioned us to follow him. We entered the buildings on the right of the square, and were conducted through a perfect maze of rooms and corridors, until we arrived at a door about which a small crowd was standing. At Costa's bidding they made way for us, and we entered a good-sized hall, which was full of people standing and sitting about, talking and

laughing freely with each other. Waiting for the King, I thought, but I was mistaken. Costa led us towards one side of the room where a dozen men were talking round a man seated in a chair. He was laughing when I first saw him, apparently at some joke made by one of his companions. Costa came to a halt half-a-dozen yards from him, and waited until he was noticed.

“Well, Captain?”

Costa went forward and bowed low. I could not hear what he said.

“The King,” whispered O’Ryan.

Then I began to study the man with whom our fate rested.

When smiling, he looked good-natured, but as Costa spoke to him the smile died out, and his features set into a hard, stern look, giving him the appearance of a man who would not be easily moved, and was not likely to change his mind when once he had come to a decision. He was in the prime of life, broad-shouldered and powerful-looking, though his muscles may not have been as firm as they should be. He looked as if he lived well, and did not trouble himself unnecessarily.

He listened to all Costa had to say, but asked no questions. The Spaniard retreated backwards, bowing as he did so, and the King motioned O’Ryan to approach. Those gathered round the King had become interested in us, but we were not of consequence enough to draw the groups scattered about the hall to the audience.

O’Ryan was not much of a courtier. His bow had not the dignity and grace of the Spaniard’s.

“What is this we hear of you, Captain O’Ryan?”

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We sent you on a certain expedition, from which neither you nor your comrades return. We mourned the loss of a good soldier without cause, it seems, for—well, we'll hear you first, and then see how you can answer some questions which our knowledge enables us to ask."

"I thank your Majesty for your favor."

"You may have little cause to thank me presently," said the King, and those about him laughed. How easy it is for a king to play the humorist!

O'Ryan told his tale. For a considerable time he stuck to the truth. Then he began to garnish a little. He declared that he and I had been kept in prison for a long time, and marvelled that we had not been killed as the other prisoners had been.

"My captive, your Majesty may observe, is a remarkable-looking man," O'Ryan went on. "Such men are not numerous amongst your enemies; perhaps that was why they preserved us."

"I don't see why they should save you. I have never found anything remarkable about Captain O'Ryan."

"Your Majesty may not have chanced to see me at my best."

"Get on with the tale;" but the King smiled a little at the ready answer.

O'Ryan's story now became all embroidery. He declared that the followers of the Princess were chiefly cowards, mostly engaged in quarrelling amongst themselves, and that the Princess did not know whom to trust from one hour to another.

"Saving your presence, I pity the lady," said O'Ryan solemnly. "She's too beautiful to be anywhere but in Yadasara."

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"Is that why you stayed so long with her?" said the King.

"As a man, I have a weakness for beauty, but it's not so captivating as a solid door with the key on the outside," was the answer.

"That's true," and the King nodded meaningly to his companions.

"The fact is, she's mortal sorry that she hasn't got the fighting men about her that your Majesty has about you. She showed it when she had me before her, and gave me the choice whether I would be spitted or turn traitor."

"And you turned traitor?"

"No, I only chose not to be spitted."

"It was your duty to die for your King."

"Pardon, your Majesty; I served you better by living, for I have been a spy in the enemy's camp."

"And they saved your prisoner too?"

"Yes; I chose for both of us. I took care to explain to him that he owed his life to me, and he was duly thankful. I have found him of some use."

"You saw something of the Count Vasca?"

"Too much, your Majesty."

The King seemed interested.

"Is he not a good soldier?"

"He shines amongst those he is with, but he'd be a dull ornament here."

"Still he has a large following."

"He will have when he runs before your Majesty's army."

"I have never heard that he was a coward."

"Then, in one thing I have served your Majesty," O'Ryan answered. "You have over-valued the strength of your enemy."

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"They fought well at the bridge the other day," said the King, looking hard at O'Ryan.

"A few picked men, your Majesty, that is all."

"Of which my very loyal subject, Captain O'Ryan, was one."

"I make bold to say the very best there; but I was unlucky. The best-laid plans may fail. Mine did. I had made up my mind to make a rush for the bridge at the first opportunity, and so rejoin your Majesty's service and my comrades, but I was too well watched. They didn't trust me."

"And your prisoner yonder?"

"Had I escaped, then he would have been left behind," O'Ryan returned. "It would have been a pity, for he's a fine recruit. I owe the fellow something, for I shouldn't have been here now had it not been for him. We found a secret door in the city wall, and he was strong enough to burst it open. That is how we escaped."

The King looked me up and down, measuring my strength.

"Yes, he's a fine fellow," said O'Ryan, slowly and critically. "I would ask your Majesty to spare his life; he's too good a man to kill."

"But for yourself—what have you to ask for yourself?"

"May I speak plainly?"

"Yes; it will serve you best. I never like a man less for having a ready tongue."

"Faith, your Majesty, if your favor is as ready as my tongue, we shall be good friends. Frankly, I look to receive some honor. My services seem to deserve it."

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"I had thought of the fortress," said the King slowly.

"Captain of the fortress!" answered O'Ryan thoughtfully. "It is an honorable post."

"And is already filled," was the answer. "I meant imprisonment in the fortress."

"That is hardly an honor, your Majesty."

"It has fallen to the lot of better men than you."

"That must have been before I came to Yadasara," answered O'Ryan.

"Stand back, sir; let me look at this new recruit."

He motioned me, and I approached.

"You wish to live, fellow?"

"If it please your Majesty," I answered.

"I asked your pleasure?"

"I have never begged my life from any one who had the power to take it."

"Do you understand that this is the King?" said a courtier, angry at my answer, and evidently wishing to secure his master's favor.

"I do, my lord, and I remember that I am a man."

"It seems we have two ready tongues near us," the King said, rather pleased at the discomfiture of his companion. "What is your name?"

"Clinton," I answered.

"And your country?"

"England."

"They rear good men in England," said the King to those about him. "Captain O'Ryan says you have great strength."

"I do not boast of it, your Majesty."

"Do you think you are as strong as I am?"

"Your Majesty is seated—it is difficult to judge."

"Now," said the King, rising and squaring his shoulders.

He was a more powerful man than I had imagined. I looked him up and down even as he had looked at me a few minutes ago.

"Your Majesty is well knit; but I should not fear to try my strength against yours."

"That is spoken like a man; you shall. Costa!"

The Spaniard came forward, bowing.

"Stand stiff, man. Move, and I shall let you fall. You'll fall heavily enough."

The King grasped him in the back with one hand, and very steadily raised him above his head. He held him there for a few moments, and then giving a cry to warn him, threw him forwards.

"Bravo! Bravo!" said the little knot of courtiers, and then they laughed, for Costa had not fallen on his feet. He picked himself up, and was very reluctant to be experimented upon by me.

"Your Majesty is strong," I said.

Then I took the Spaniard by the back, and raised him slowly as the King had done, but I did not throw him forwards.

"Keep still," I said, and slowly I lowered him to the floor again. I thought the King was athlete enough to know that this was by far the most difficult part of the feat.

The courtiers were silent, but the King was more generous.

"You are stronger than I am," he said. "You will serve me?"

"I am at your Majesty's disposal!"

"Captain O'Ryan, I thank you for such a recruit. I will have him in my bodyguard. You will see that

he is well cared for. Clinton, if your loyalty equals your strength, you shall rise to honor."

I bowed, feeling rather ashamed that circumstances forced me to deceive him.

"Is it your Majesty's pleasure that I look to the feeding and clothing of your new guard before I am imprisoned in the fortress?" asked O'Ryan.

"I had forgotten you."

"It is not too late for your Majesty to remember me favorably."

"You were Captain O'Ryan when you left Yadasara."

"I was, your Majesty."

"You are still Captain O'Ryan. You have a ready tongue, but such tongues often tell more than the plain truth. Your own loyalty wants proving, and your recruit's wants showing. Let me trust you both, and you, Captain O'Ryan, shall have nothing to complain of," and with a wave of his hand he dismissed us.

"We shall have that tankard of wine after sundown, friend Costa," said O'Ryan as we went out. "And since my comrade treated you so gently, faith, it is only fair that you should pay the reckoning."

CHAPTER XXII.

A STRANGE KNIGHT IN YADASARA

MUCH to his astonishment, O'Ryan did not have to fight for Bridget. My astonishment was not great in this respect, though it was in another, when I recalled how he had once declared that the Princess and Bridget had much in common.

O'Ryan's lodging was in the lower part of the city, in a building abutting upon the walls.

I heard Bridget before I saw her.

"Who's there?" she shouted, as we entered.

"Dennis, me darlin'," was the answer.

I thought I was to be the spectator of a little love scene. As an overture gives the keynote of the play, the word darling suggested to my mind a little comedy of sentiment, though the voice of the heroine was not too pleasing. Then she came upon the scene, and I smiled. I had difficulty not to laugh outright. Somewhere I have stated that the women of Drussenland were beautiful; but to every rule there are exceptions. Bridget was one of the exceptions. She was a tall, large-boned woman, with big hands and feet, which she gave the impression of being rather proud of, for her short, tight-fitting skirt showed off the one, and her sleeves, being rolled half-way up the arm did not lessen the magnitude of the other. Her features were angular, her black hair tangled, and her

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eyes, which I admit were fine, had little gentleness in them. Of sentiment she could know nothing. She stood facing us, her hands on her hips.

"You've come back, then?"

"Yes," said O'Ryan meekly. I had never heard him speak like it before.

"And what have you got to say for yourself?"

For some few moments my companion had nothing whatever to say.

"It's a long story, Bridget," he said suddenly.

"Trust you for that."

"You don't seem very pleased to see me," he went on in an injured tone. "I've been living chiefly in prison since I saw you last. I looked for a good meal, and then to telling you my story."

"Tell me, first, who is this you have with you?"

"He is one of the King's guards now. I brought him back with me. I captured him."

She looked at O'Ryan, and then at me.

"That's a good beginning to a tale, indeed. You could no more capture him than you can make a fool of me. Is he looking for a good meal too?"

"If you please, Bridget."

"Well, you can have what I've got, which isn't much. You've never done over your share of the providing, Dennis, but I've missed the little you did do. Mind, you're not forgiven. I'll feed you, and I'll hear your tale. If the tale doesn't please me, out you go. I'm going to have no more nonsense. You may be a very fine captain amongst your good-for-nothing men, but here you've got a woman to deal with, and she does any ordering that's wanted."

She led the way into a small room.

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"A fine, independent woman, eh?" said O'Ryan, loud enough for her to hear, as we followed.

The room was not uncomfortable. I had not the opportunity of seeing much of what I may call the home life of Yadasara, but there was certainly a touch of civilization about Bridget's home. Independent as she was, she may possibly have learned something from her husband. Strangely assorted couple as they were, I believe there was a sort of affection between them. She improved upon acquaintance. She began to thaw as she set food before us. There was a rough kindness about her, and, personally, I have much to thank her for; but I was not surprised that there had been no keen competition for her during O'Ryan's absence. Such a woman would make a man pause before he determined to marry her. Marriage is always a solemn matter, but there are women who seem to add to the awful solemnity—and some men, too, I suppose.

After the meal came the tale. The King had been satisfied with a little compared to what O'Ryan thought necessary to set Bridget's suspicions at rest. But he pleased her not the least by telling her how much he had talked of her to me. This was one of the few truths the whole story had contained, and I willingly endorsed it. She was a woman, for all her large bones and big limbs, and surely there never was a woman who was not pleased to be thought of by some man. She may deny it, but there's a little fiction about every woman.

She did not suggest that we should go when the tale was finished, and since I undertook to contribute to the necessities, I was made welcome, and took up my abode with the O'Ryans.

The following day I was introduced to my comrades of the King's guard. Picked men they were for strength and stature, and I may add that it would have been difficult to pick a more select band of ruffians. Many were Drussenlanders, but many were foreigners, who in their own countries would, I fancy, have been living in prison, if the breaking of a sterner law had not cut short their career altogether. Still, they welcomed me, and I could not afford to be particular. Dressed in a similar fashion to that in which I had first seen O'Ryan, I entered upon my new part, and kept my eyes open. I had not been in the city forty-eight hours before I concluded that it was most improbable that I should ever bring the Princess there as a conqueror, and it seemed equally unlikely that I should discover how the foreigners had been brought into Drussenland. There were many just as anxious to make the discovery as I was, who, finding the promises which had induced them to come unfulfilled, would willingly have escaped. It had not been difficult to persuade them to come, for there was hardly one who had not been a penniless adventurer, the clothes he stood in his only possession. It was hardly strange that firearms had not found their way into Drussenland. Of plans I had none. I had escaped from my enemies, and all I could do was to await the turn of Fortune's wheel.

The duties of my position were numerous and hard. It was an honor to be one of the King's guard, but we had not such an easy time as those who had not the honor. O'Ryan was pleased to jest about it.

"Clinton the guardsman is not such a fine fellow as Sir Verrall the knight," he said. "You must miss the society."

“True, but I’m going back to it some day.”

“It was easier getting in here than it will be getting out,” he answered. “I only know one safe way, and I often think it’s the way I shall go.”

“Which way is that?”

“The way dead men take. They are carried to the door, and then—a gentle push and good-bye. I expect I shall end so.”

“Might a living man take the journey?”

“He might begin it; he would be dead before he reached the end of it.”

“That is not the kind of journey I want to take,” I answered.

“Nor I, but we’re both likely to take it, unless we’re more fortunate than we deserve to be.”

It chanced that my duties took me to the fortress, and since Costa, with whom I had to do, had taken a liking to me, I saw more than I should have done in an ordinary way. The fortress, if well supplied with food, could have withstood a siege indefinitely. Even were the city in an enemy’s hands, it would avail nothing against the stronghold. It was approached by a single narrow path, cut out of the solid rock, steep ascents alternating with flights of steps — a tortuous way that a few men could hold against an army. The battlements on the summit were only a small portion of the fortress, a portion indeed that was little used except for the purpose of watching an enemy’s approach; the main part was about half-way up the rock, or, to be more explicit, in the very heart of the rock. There was accommodation for a considerable force of soldiers, council chambers, and a very labyrinth of dingy corridors and evil-looking dungeons. There were prisoners, too, but I am thankful

to say that I was not called upon to have anything to do with them, or I had surely not have written this history.

As Costa showed me what he was pleased to term some of the things of interest, I did not wonder that O'Ryan spoke of the Fortress of Yadasara with respect. Here were instruments of torture not on show, not diabolical inventions of the past exhibited for the present to shudder at, but machines which had been used only a few days ago, and might be used again to-morrow.

"It is difficult for a man not to confess here," Costa observed, with a grim smile. "We do things thoroughly in Yadarasa."

"Horrible! I can only trust that I may never be called upon to assist."

"Do you mean in the place of honor—as victim?"

"Neither as victim nor executioner. I have no liking to see others suffer."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"No?" he said. "Still it is better to see others than suffer oneself. Death comes slowly if the executioners are clever at their work, and a slow death is painful. I saw a very slow one once, and if these rocky walls could have split at human cries——"

"Spare me details."

"You are too tender, my friend, with all your strength. It is bad for a man to be too tender in this country. Besides, this one I speak of should have confessed. He was a fool not to confess."

"Or a brave man to suffer as he did."

"Call it bravery if you will."

"Would confession have saved him?" I asked.

"It would have saved him much pain. He would have died, doubtless, but more quickly."

He was a bloodthirsty villian, this Spaniard, but I could not afford to quarrel with him.

"We have some mercy," he said, leading me along another corridor, "and we give decent burial. I will show you. These dungeons are used for those who have to attend confession. Indeed, the ceremony usually takes place in their own dungeon. It is more convenient."

He stopped before a door.

"No, not that one. It is occupied."

"A man waiting to confess?"

"Yes, but he'll give little trouble. He has friends, too, and that may help him."

"How?"

"It is good to make friends with the executioners," he answered. "They can bungle their work and kill quickly. Here is an empty dungeon."

He opened a heavy door, and a damp atmosphere met us. Costa took a key, and going to a slab in one corner of the floor, unlocked it, and lifted the slab by a ring which was fastened in its centre.

"For dead men," he said, pointing down.

A smooth slide went down at an angle, and as I bent over to look, I could hear the faint sound of water washing restlessly.

"Into the river?" I asked.

"Yes. From many of these dungeons there is such an exit. They lead into one big shaft which goes deep into the water under the rock."

"And so out into the river?"

"Sometimes. If the weight attached to the body

to keep it down should slip off, the body might rise in the river. I heard of one case."

He replaced the slab, and locked it.

"You don't like the fortress?"

"No," I answered.

"Loyal subjects need not fear it."

"I do not fear it."

"That is well. If you should ever cease to be loyal, make friends with the executioners."

I was glad to be in the open air and the sunlight again. There was the feeling of having escaped from some peril. The very thought of those ghastly machines made my limbs ache and my blood run cold. Then a strange fancy took possession of me. Could Costa have been commanded to show me the horrors of the fortress? Had my loyalty been suspected? I tried to remember if I had in any way failed in my duty, and could find nothing to accuse myself of. But that the idea had come into my head at all made me nervous. For hours afterwards I found myself muttering, "Make friends with the executioners."

Struggle with myself as I would, I could not throw off my nervousness. A burning desire to get away from Yadasara took possession of me. I had indeed escaped one danger to get into a far worse one. Only one ambition had I—to learn the way out of Drussenland. That evening in the guard-room I brought the conversation round to the subject with two or three of my comrades, carefully, of course, not to excite wonder.

"There was the sound of water, I remember," said one. O'Ryan had said the same.

"Running water?"

“No; falling water.”

I remembered the waterfall that poor Mustapha and I had started out from Brâyle to see. Could it have anything to do with the entrance to Drussenland? What a fool I was not to have gone and looked at it before climbing the mountain-path! I could not call myself a fool for climbing, for it had led me to Daria. I was glad to know that I could not call that folly. Though my nerves were unstrung, it proved that I was not all a coward even after seeing the horrors of the fortress. I dreamt that night of the poor wretches there, waiting to confess. How little did I think that this very man would be the unconscious means of giving me courage at the one moment of my life when I had most need of it!

It was towards the evening of the next day that, being off duty, I wandered towards the lower city in the direction of the Northern gate. I did not feel equal to laughing and drinking with my comrades in the guard-room. It was policy to play my part with them; but to-night I wanted to be alone, to think and look my position squarely in the face.

The sharp clatter of horses' hoofs upon the rough road suddenly disturbed my thoughts. I did not wish to attract attention, so stepped back into the corner of a building. Coming up the street was a knight followed by two of the King's guards. He was a mere stripling, but he sat his charger well, and made a brave show in his glittering armor. He did not look a formidable opponent, and I could not see a dint upon his harness—that sure trade mark of past combats. A carpet knight; still, he was young and pleasant to look upon, and I watched him as he came without feeling any particular interest in him. He

was almost level with me, when he drew rein and waited for the men to overtake him. He pointed apparently to the fortress, and asked some question. I could not hear the question nor the answer given, but in turning to speak he gave me a better view of his face. It was familiar to me, strangely familiar, but I could not remember where I had seen the youth before. He may have passed me on some occasion when I had been on duty in the palace, but I did not remember his doing so. His face, his whole bearing would naturally command attention. I felt convinced that it was not in Yadasara that I had seen him, and if not it must have been in the service of the Princess. No, he was not one of the knights I had known there. Who was he? What had he come to the city for? In my restless state of mind his advent made me doubly anxious.

As soon as the three horsemen had disappeared in the direction of the palace, I retraced my steps and went into the guard-room. I asked no questions; there was no need to, for the news of the stranger's arrival was already known.

"You'll have an opportunity before long, Clinton, of repaying your enemies for putting you in prison," said one.

"Oh? How so?"

"A knight has just come to the palace with news."

"From the rebel camp? I saw him passing through the streets. What news does he bring?"

"You're in too great a hurry, Clinton. They say the King will not talk of business to-night; so the news will not be told until to-morrow. Who was the knight? Did you know him?"

"No."

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"Plenty of show, but not much muscle behind it," he laughed.

"So fine a messenger should bring good news, at any rate," I answered, and I left the guard-room, going slowly until I was clear of the palace square. Then I hurried to find O'Ryan.

Who was this knight who, coming from the Princess's camp, was allowed to enter the city so freely? Surely they would not have treated a messenger from her with such respect? What did his coming portend to me? Was there treachery against her? The net was closing in upon us, and a sickly fear took hold of me as I hurried to O'Ryan's quarters.

CHAPTER XXIII**BETRAYED**

It was a terrible disappointment to find that O’Ryan was not in. Time was of the utmost importance to us. I felt that we were in the greatest danger that had yet threatened us, and I seemed incapable of summoning my courage to meet it. I tried to reason with myself, tried to remember stories of brave men who had confessed to moments of extreme terror, but in vain. Although I lusted to live, it was not death that I feared. I seemed to have been fencing the dread enemy so persistently since I had entered Drussenland that I had become familiar with his appearance, and somewhat contemptuous of him. It was the thought of the horrors of the fortress which frightened me. I knew well that my torture would no be light if I were taken.

I found Bridget. She was a busy woman. She was washing, and the sight of such a wholesome, homely work in progress did more to steady my nerves than all attempts to reason with myself.

“Where is the Captain?” I asked. It pleased her to hear me call him Captain.

She shook her head.

“On duty or off he’s difficult to find. Dennis tells me he is in great favor with his Majesty.”

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"Where should I most likely find him? I have important news for him."

"Tell me, and I'll tell him when he comes."

"He may not come soon enough."

Bridget smiled. I fancied she had rather a liking for me.

"That means you don't want to tell me," she said.

"Well, I quarrel with no one for being careful with secrets."

"I wish I knew where to find him," I went on, moving restlessly about the room.

"You had best sit down and wait. It nears feeding-time, and Dennis comes then."

I should probably not have taken her advice, but at that moment O'Ryan came in. He had been hurrying, too.

"You are here; that's good. Come with me. I have some news which will startle you."

He led the way into my room, and although Bridget was inclined to rebel at being so unceremoniously shut out of our confidence, he took no notice of her. It was evidence enough that he had scented a very real danger, or he would not have had the courage to defy his wife.

"I've made a discovery, Verrall."

"So have I."

"The same, perhaps."

"It is likely. I hurried here to find you."

"A lot has happened since I was in Yadasara last, or else I didn't keep my ears wide enough open when I was here. For a long time past Vasca has been in treaty with the King. At a favorable opportunity he is to deliver up the Princess to her enemies."

"The scoundrel!"

"There's a regular conspiracy. Vasca is only one of the scoundrels. There are dozens of them at the Princess's court, and there are hundreds of men ready to desert at the Count's bidding. I was told this to-day by a comrade. I had to laugh and applaud it as an excellent piece of diplomacy on the King's part. That is not all. In Yadasara Vasca has many friends, and, it is said, may play a double game with the King, openly serving him while he waits his opportunity to dethrone him, and reign in his stead. A pretty piece of villainy, eh, Verrall?"

"And our position, O'Ryan?"

"Faith, it's much the same to us whoever wins; we stand to lose."

"Is this all you know?"

"By Saint Patrick, it's enough to keep a man's wits at full stretch—enough to stretch our limbs to the full, too, in that infernal fortress; but it is not all. I overheard that the time to accomplish this villainy is ripe. It is to be done at once, Verrall; how, I don't know, but it's quite likely we shall hear to-morrow."

"Quite," I answered. "Now the coming of the knight is explained."

"The coming of what knight?"

"My discovery was not the same as yours," I returned; and I told him what had happened that evening.

"You did not recognize him?" he asked.

"No. His face is familiar, but I do not know who he is."

"Some archer, perhaps, tricked out as a knight."

"Maybe, but I think he lacked strength to pull a good bow."

"I wish I had seen him," he said thoughtfully.

"What are we to do?"

O'Ryan shrugged his shoulders.

"Can we reach the top of the wall from the roof of this house?"

"Yes."

"And drop down?"

"Yes. What would be the use of that?"

"We should be free."

"We might, if we happened to get killed. We should probably only break our legs, and that wouldn't help us much."

"We could use a rope."

"The wall is guarded night and day. There is a sentry always behind this house." He crossed to a window which commanded a view of the wall. "There is always one stationed there; just now there are two."

"Well, man, suggest something; we are wasting valuable time," I said, somewhat irritably.

"Let's go and eat."

"I want to save my life, O'Ryan. I have seen something of the fortress, and my courage is water."

"Then put some wine in it," he returned. "It's good advice, Verrall. No man ever felt courageous on an empty stomach. We are safe for to-night. The King has a banquet to-night, and he never allows business to interfere with his pleasure. He is not all wisdom, but he's wise enough for that."

Food was upon the table ready for us, but Bridget was sullen. O'Ryan attempted to make the conver-

sation general, and did his best to be humorous; but it was labor lost, for he not only supplied the wit, but the laughter too. Bridget was not to be cajoled, and there was no smile in me.

"Perhaps you're right," he said suddenly, after laughing at one of his own sallies. "It's not a time to be merry; and, faith, my tankard's empty."

Bridget evidently thought that if he talked seriously he might be worth listening to, for she pushed the wine across the table to him, and waited.

"Our friend here is in danger, Bridget," he said, leaning back after a long draught. Not being too certain of Bridget's loyalty to us, I would have stopped him, but he silenced me with a look.

"What kind of danger?" she asked, looking first at her husband and then at me.

"We don't quite know," he answered. "The fact is, Bridget, the King has strange fancies, which vary often in accordance with what he sups upon. It may be that I shall not be able to convince the King how mistaken he is if he is inclined to think ill of Clinton, and in that event the best thing Clinton can do is to get out of his Majesty's way."

"Easier to speak of than it is to do," she replied. "I never yet heard of a man escaping if the King was bent upon his punishment."

This remark was not a great consolation to me.

"Our friend Clinton may be the first to do so," said O'Ryan. "Being first is not always the place one would choose, but it's a position somebody must always occupy. Think you there is a rope handy, long enough to reach from the top to the bottom of the wall?"

"The city wall!" she exclaimed.

"Yes."

"But the sentries?"

"Let's stick to the rope question first," said O'Ryan.

"I think I could find the rope."

"Very well. Now is there a ring in the roof firm enough to fix this rope to—firm enough to bear the weight of a man?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll fix the rope in case of necessity."

"The sentry will see you."

"It will be dark presently."

"He will hear you."

"We must chance something."

Bridget was thoughtful for some moments.

"I have a better way," she said suddenly. "I have been washing clothes to-day. I will hang them to dry. I can fix the rope, and let it be hidden under some of the clothes."

"Excellent!" O'Ryan answered. "Women are not all fools, Clinton."

"Nor all men," said Bridget, "though for that matters the exceptions are few."

"It's a smart tongue ye have, but I've always said you had brains with it. Fix the rope at once, Bridget, or they'll be wondering why you hang clothes so late."

"Does he go to-night?" she asked, pointing at me.

"No."

Bridget left us.

"Why not to-night?" I asked.

"That road's the last resource," he answered. "It will be the most dangerous way you've ever traversed. The way you got into this country was child's play

to the road you'll take out of Yadasara, if you have to use the rope. Patience, we're not caught yet. This knight who came to-day may be a friend. Before we act it will be well to know that he has not come from the Princess with a message for us."

"I should know him."

"She may have to use strange messengers if she is surrounded by treachery."

"How was it the knight entered Yadasara so easily?" I asked.

"Since some about the Princess are friends of the King, some about the King may be friends of hers. Treachery was never yet one-sided. Fill your tankard," he said, pushing me the wine. "The gates of the fortress are not yet closed upon us. We must know where the danger lies before we run. It would be poor sport to run into it when we fondly hoped we were getting out of it."

It was some consolation to me that night to know that the rope was fixed ready for use. The knowledge did not afford me deep nor very refreshing slumber, but at least I felt safer. Could the knight be a messenger from the Princess? It was possible. It would be folly to go without knowing. O'Ryan was certainly right to delay the escape.

Next morning, early, I took occasion to follow Bridget on to the roof. The sentry was on the wall, standing by a raised battlement, which formed a kind of sentry-box. He was a man I knew something of, and he chaffed me for my devotion to Mistress Bridget.

I laughed, and asked him if he would change places with me.

"If I were sure the Captain were on duty," he answered.

"And there's another you'd have to think of," said Bridget, as she lifted some clothes to show me where the rope lay curled ready for use. It was deftly done, and I no longer questioned her good-will towards me.

The wall rose only about six feet above the roof, and, casually asking permission of the sentry, I clambered up. I was anxious to measure the height of the wall with my eye to see what the ground immediately below was like, and to look at the surrounding country.

"An impregnable city," I said.

"Yes," answered the sentry, "and this is one of the lowest parts of the wall."

I looked down to the ground, forty feet below, and was glad to notice that it was soft turf where the rope would hang. If it should not prove long enough, I might drop with comparative safety. My way afterwards would have to be towards the river, and I calculated what start I could reckon upon if my enemies came from the city gate to follow me.

"The morning air is pleasant," I said, dropping on to the roof again.

"Aye, after sleep," he answered. "I grew tired of it two hours ago."

I nodded him a farewell, hoping he would not be the sentry when the time came for me to go. I did not want to kill him, and I could hardly hope to escape a struggle with the sentry, which must end badly for him if matters were to go well with me.

"Sharp eyes and wide ears, remember," said O'Ryan, as I went to the palace.

It was good, but unnecessary, advice. My sinking heart made me almost too much alert.

The day passed slowly. The King's revels had been protracted to the early hours of morning, and I doubt not the generous wine had flowed freely. We idled away the morning and the afternoon in the palace yard. It was best so. If danger was to come, it would suit me better if it came after dark.

It was late in the afternoon when the King came. He passed through the chamber in which I was stationed, leaning upon the arm of a friend, and cracking some joke with him as he went. Soon afterwards the knight who caused me so much anxiety passed. I made no effort to escape his observation; indeed, I watched him closely. If he came from the Princess and saw me, he would surely give me some sign. Either he did not see me, or else he had no message for me, for he went through the room looking neither to right nor left.

It was dark when I went off actual duty. The King not having retired, I was not at liberty to leave the palace, so made my way to the guard-room. A kind of cloister, open to the square, ran along outside the guard-room, and the night being warm, we gathered there, two or three together, to drink our wine. They were a careless lot these companions of mine, holding life and death very cheaply, soldiers of fortune ready to serve the highest paymaster, men with few morals, but of undoubted courage, and with some sort of faithfulness amongst themselves. To-morrow they cared nothing for, to-day they were living in, and they jested and sang snatches of song as they emptied the flagons. Those about me railed at me as a melancholy fellow, and persisted in advising me

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to find another lass if the one I had set my heart on refused to be kind. I tried to laugh with them, but it was a poor attempt at mirth.

Suddenly the tramp of men sounded in the square, and I saw O'Ryan at the head of his company. I was seated in such a position that he must have seen me, but he took no notice. It was an unusual thing for him to be there at all. I heard a captain of the guard ask him the reason.

"The King's orders," he answered shortly.

Then there was the flare of torches in the square, and the King came out followed by several knights. I only noticed one particularly, the one who walked beside him, the strange knight who had come to the city yesterday. I saw the King whisper to him, and the knight's eyes wandered round the square in search of some one. I could well imagine who it was they would rest upon.

With my comrades I had risen to my feet, and stood waiting.

The King did not look towards me, but the knight did, and our eyes met. Then he turned to the King and spoke to him. The King smiled grimly.

"Perhaps it is no sight for such eyes as yours," I heard the King say. "Retire, if you will."

The knight bowed, and crossed the square towards one of the entrances to the palace. There he paused, perhaps startled at the sound of the King's voice.

"There is a traitor amongst us. Guard the square well. We shall find a short way of dealing with him. It is easy to play the traitor, but he shall find it difficult to bear the punishment."

Escape seemed impossible, but that short method the King spoke of came as a tonic to me and gave

me the courage of desperation. My left hand went to my scabbard, my finger and thumb tried the ease with which the weapon reposed in it, and my right hand was ready to grasp the hilt. Rapid action might, at least, bring prompt death. That was the utmost good I could expect. I saw O’Ryan with his company waiting for the King’s command. I saw the knight still at the palace entrance, regarding the scene as he might have watched an interesting comedy. Who was he? Surely it was he who had betrayed me.

There was a pause—a silence which seemed long. Then the King looked at me quickly, straight, and without hesitation. He knew exactly the spot where I stood.

“Seize the traitor, Clinton!” and his arm shot out, pointing at me as he spoke.

It was no time to plead. My sword was in my hand in a moment, and I rushed to the open side of the square. It never occurred to me that I could save my life, but I might escape the fortress. I looked to see O’Ryan rush to fight his way out with me, but he did not do so. Instead, he gave a word of command to his company, and, leading them, roared as he came—

“For the King’s honor! Seize the traitor!”

I was betrayed, indeed, and by the man I had trusted. For one moment I turned to meet him half-way, and pay him for his treachery, but the open side of the square offered my only chance of freedom, and I dashed onwards. That the command to arrest me had come suddenly gave me the advantage for a moment. Those about me had no time to lay hands upon me. I was half across the space towards my

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only hope of escape before a man came within reach of my sword, and then I seemed to be surrounded.

"Take him alive!" I heard a voice cry. The devil who cried it was behind me. The devil was O'Ryan! His treachery added blind fury to my desperate courage. Swish fell my sword, and I rushed on over the prostrate form of a foe. Into the thick of my enemies I went, always a little space before me cleared by the swing of my weapon. Yet they closed in upon me. Hands behind attempted to hold me, but I shook them off.

"Take him alive!"

They rushed in upon me on every side. I struck right and left with my sword. I struck out with my left arm. When a sword menaced me I sprang towards it, hoping to end the battle and my life. But I was condemned not to die.

"Take him alive!"

I struggled forwards. My enemies fell back from me. Only one man seemed to stand between me and freedom. I cut him from my path, and sprang over him as he fell.

"Take him alive!"

The cry was behind me. My enemies were behind me. The square was behind me. And I rushed madly through the streets of the city.

CHAPTER XXIV**THE FIGHT UPON THE STAIRS**

I DID not know the city well. I fled down one street and up another, endeavoring to keep my general direction towards the house by the wall. O'Ryan had turned traitor, but through that house lay my only means of escape. People in the streets ran out of my path, through doors which were quickly shut, or down narrow alleys where I should not be likely to venture. I ran swiftly, but my pursuers ran swiftly, too. At a turning I glanced behind me, and felt that they were gaining upon me. At any moment I might meet a second band at the end of a street. O'Ryan would guess my goal. Oh for a moment to pay him the debt I owed! I had felt a fierce joy at first to find myself free, to know that I had fought my way through my foes; but as I ran, followed by that yelling crowd, I was sorry to be alive. I had escaped from one death, but a more fearful one awaited me. I could cheat it. Surely it was no coward's way in such circumstances. My sword was in my hand. Why not fall upon it? I stopped, almost determined, and then ran on again. It would be a coward's death. I could not use it.

The pause had brought my pursuers closer upon my heels. They poured furiously into a street almost directly after me. There was a roar of savage

triumph, and I saw that what I had been expecting had happened. A crowd rushed towards me from the other end of the street. What need to run further? I stood still. I had travelled in a circle, for the buildings of the palace rose above the houses behind me. I planted my back against the wall, and waited. They seemed a long time in coming.

Suddenly I caught sight of a man across the street almost opposite me. He had apparently come out of a narrow passage. It was the strange knight, and he beckoned me. Then he went quickly down the passage. I could not believe that he meant to help me, yet if he did not, why did he beckon, seeing that I was already caught in a trap? I had not so many chances to choose from as to miss even an unlikely one. The crowds from both ends of the street were almost upon me as I dashed after the knight. He turned to make sure that I was following, but did not wait for me. Presently he stopped, and I overtook him.

“This way quickly.”

He turned into another narrow passage, and a few yards down opened a door.

“Quickly,” he said.

I followed him, and he shut the door quietly. My pursuers rushed past, but none attempted to open the door. We were in a small paved court, open to the sky, and formed by the walls of the surrounding houses. It was not overlooked, and the only entrance seemed to be by the way we had come in. Still, it was too dark to see distinctly, there may have been a way into one of the houses.

“I owe you thanks,” I said.

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"You are too good a man to die like a dog in the streets," was the answer.

From the distance came the cry, "Take him alive!" growing fainter as my enemies went through the city.

"There is a worse death before me if I fall alive into their hands," I said.

"What death?"

"A slow one in the fortress."

It seemed to me that the knight shuddered.

"You are a stranger in Yadasara?" I asked.

"Yes—almost."

"Your face is known to me. May I know the name of the knight who has helped me?"

"His name is not known to you."

"At least tell me why you have helped me?"

"I love a brave man."

"Is that the only reason?"

"No, I had a message for Sir Verrall."

"You came from the Princess Daria?"

"To find you," he answered, "and to give you a message."

It was, then, all O'Ryan's treachery. I had met villains in Drussenland, but surely none so great as this Irishman.

"I believed that it was you who had betrayed me. I have wronged you."

"You have wronged me."

"Let my gratitude make amends," I answered.

"You shall find mine a willing hand to help you if you have need of it."

"You promise readily."

"You helped me readily. What message is it you have for me?"

"It is from one who loves you."

"Tell it me."

"You can think of love when your enemies go howling through the city for you?"

"Aye, Sir Knight, even when death has me by the throat."

My pursuers had evidently lost the trail, and were returning.

"Your chance is a poor one."

"I may outwit them yet."

"Fortune fights for you," he answered, "but there comes an end to fortune."

My pursuers were close. I could hear their loud inquiries.

It is time to give you the message," said my companion. "It may be too late if I delay. It is from a woman. She loves you well—so well, indeed, that your heart is her only home, and thus she enters it."

The last words were hissed out as a swift blow struck me. It would have delivered its deathly message but for the mail shirt I wore, for it was well directed, and given with force. I caught the arm ready to strike again, and it was a woman who cried out. I knew the strange knight now—Lady Aldrida.

"This is devil's work, not a woman's!" I said.

"I have found him!" she cried. "Quick, quick!"

"Silence!" I hissed, "or——"

The bloodhounds had heard her. They were close to us. A moment ago I had heard them; now they listened for the cry again.

I tried to stop her but failed.

"Quick! In the narrow passage!"

She shrieked, and she threw her arms round me.

How tightly she held me! She was a woman, but a roar told me that this was no time to hesitate. She

would not let go. I had to tear myself from her. It was roughly done; I could not help it. I know she staggered backwards and fell. I picked up my sword which had fallen, and was running down the passage the next moment.

I came into a wider street, which was empty, and which I knew. My enemies had not yet discovered me. If only O'Ryan were behind me, and the house not guarded, I might yet escape.

It was quite dark now. From buildings here and there light came, stretching a broad beam across the road, and I went carefully to avoid being seen. Presently I saw several torches flaring in the road before me, and knowing that I could not pass these unnoticed, even if they happened to be carried by peaceful citizens, I turned into a narrow path hastily. I came near to my undoing, for a few yards down a door was open, and in the light which came from the opening were three men. Fortunately I had trod softly, and there was a buttress at hand to shelter me.

"He must have friends in the city, or he would not have escaped," I heard one man say.

"He'll be caught before morning. Every street is full of men watching for him," was the answer.

"Oh, yes, he'll be caught."

"And then?"

"Death!"

The first speaker said the word slowly, and after a pause. There was a silence as though more than the mere action of dying were implied.

"It's a pity, for he's a fine fellow—too good for the death that comes after your handling," said one of the men.

"He shall find me a friend, as that poor devil did to-day."

"You killed him quickly?"

"Instantly. In five minutes he was sliding down into his grave."

"It is well to make a friend of the executioner."

"Yes. I've been the last friend a man has turned to many a time, and the best friend he ever had."

I could not doubt that the men were talking of me, and I remembered the prisoner in the fortress. It was the executioner who was leaning in the doorway, resting after his day's grim occupation. He was willing to befriend me. It was a pleasant knowledge, but I did not come out of my hiding-place. I should be glad of his friendship if I needed it, but at present I was a free man.

The sound of voices, growing each instant more distinct, told me how short a time the present might be. The crowd were in full cry after me again.

"That sounds as if he had been caught," said the executioner, and followed by his companions he came hastily up the passage.

I crouched by the wall behind the buttress, and the moment they reached the street, ran down the passage. If I was to reach the house by the wall, I must do so quickly, or it would be too late.

I came opposite the house, and my heart sank within me. There were lights within; two or three torches were before the door, throwing grotesque shadows of men standing there, and in the street to the left and to the right were torches. The place was well watched.

I drew back into the passage down which I had

come, and considered my position. It has often been a marvel to me since that I was able to think as calmly as I did. O'Ryan knew of the rope, and since he had turned traitor, it was probably no longer in its place ready for use. Instead, doubtless, my enemies were waiting for me on the roof, else why had they not made it impossible for me to enter the house? With a sudden rush I might be able to elude the men standing near the door, and unless the trap was securely laid for me within, this possibility would hardly have been left open. I remembered that I was to be taken alive, that there was no desire to kill me. And I was conscious of something else. The darkness was my friend. With daylight every thing would be against me. Even if the rope had been removed, a jump from the city walls gave a chance for freedom, even if a poor one, and a desperate effort might, at least, prevent my being taken alive. So I went to the end of the passage, and looked at the house again.

Murmuring voices came from either end of the street. There was no consciousness that the man waited for was so close. Those before the door, so far as I could discover in the darkness, did not appear to be keeping a very careful watch. A bold rush would disconcert them, and I should get a start of the men gathered in the street. The more I weighed the possibilities, so much the more did it seem to me that my only escape lay through the house opposite. There was another fact which hurried my decision. I heard the distant cries of other bands of enemies who had been scouring the city in search of me. If a desperate effort was to be made, now was the time to make it. I gripped my sword firmly, made certain

that the dagger in my belt could be easily drawn, and then, with a prayer for safety, dashed across the street. It was a little prayer, with little faith in it, I fear. How could one man against an army expect safety?

The men before the door were taken by surprise, as I had calculated, but they recovered themselves more quickly than I had expected. I was not well within the doorway before the air was filled with shoutings and the darkness with rushing men.

“Take him alive! Take him alive!”

The barbarity of the cry, knowing what being taken alive meant, put desperate strength into my arm, and the courage of despair into my heart. I dashed into the passage, and sprang up the stairs, but I had little start in the race. My enemies were upon the steps behind me, and that I might not be struck in the back, I was forced to turn upon them. It was a moment in which a man forgets the sacredness of human life. The first who sprang towards me fell back, with arms wide spread, clutching at nothing in the air, his soul leaping into the unseen ere his body lay still. A second fell towards me flat upon his face. A third span round, and then pitched head foremost into the crowd of shouting men below. Step by step I mounted backwards, my face to the enemy. It was a narrow stairway; two men could hardly strike at me together, and those who staggered back impeded those behind them.

“Take him alive!”

The cry came from the street. Those near me heeded it not at all. There was savagery in their eyes, a longing to avenge the death of comrades, and I was glad. Death, swift and certain, was a fitting

finale to such a fight. So I retreated step by step upwards, my sword red from point to hilt, the perspiration standing heavy upon my face and arm.

"What is all this?"

The voice behind me nearly took me off my guard.

"Out of the way, old woman."

"Strike him down."

"Her husband shall cudgel her presently."

Shouting, they rushed at me again. Bridget was behind me, but she did not come close enough to hinder my defence. I thought I heard her growl with satisfaction as my foremost foes reeled back down the steps. Still I retreated upwards.

"The rope!" she whispered.

"Still there?"

"Yes."

She might be deceiving me, but her manner sounded honest. How was she still my friend when her husband was so vile a traitor to friendship?

Time pressed. My panting heart warned me, and my knees shook a little. The strain was telling upon me; and there was more than sweat on my arm now. A weapon had touched me, deep enough to fill my sword-hand with blood. That meant weakness presently, and weakness——

"Take him alive!" came the cry. Yes, weakness meant that.

"The roof. There is only the sentinel."

Bridget's words put new courage into me. I stayed another rush, and then sprang backwards. I was almost at the top of the stairs now.

"Let me pass."

I knew the voice. Sword in hand, O'Ryan pushed his way through the crowd below, jumped across the

body of the last man who had fallen, and came at me. Had a dash to the roof meant absolute safety at that moment, I do not think I should have taken it. My greatest enemy in the world was before me. Revenge and death poised the scales equally. It was his life or mine now. Those below seemed to recognize the supreme moment. They did not follow, but gave the Captain free fighting-room. I had the advantage in position, but his arm was fresh. Engaging me swiftly, he pressed me sorely. My mad longing for revenge drew an oath from me as he parried my thrusts skilfully. I had never seen him handle his weapon so well before. The devil gave his arch-servant a science which baffled me.

“Dog! Dog!” he kept saying loud enough for all his friends to hear.

And I grew reckless in my efforts to silence him for ever.

With his eyes fixed on mine, he watched his opportunity. With a swift stroke he put my sword aside, and sprang at me even to the step on which I was standing.

“For Heaven’s sake wound me, Verrall!” he whispered.

I had done so almost before the words were spoken, how badly I did not know. He fell back into the arms of his comrades so heavily, that I thought death had ended our acquaintanceship. My sword slipped from my hand, but I drew my dagger, and ran to the roof. Bridget stood in my way a moment, but I pushed her aside, and was on the roof before my enemies had time to follow me.

I flung the curled rope over the wall, and then jumped forward to meet my last enemy, the sentry.

I was glad to think it was not the man with whom I had talked that morning. The sentry was unprepared, and knew not how desperate a man he had to deal with. He struck one blow at me, and then— Ah! It was most awful work to do. The dagger passed in softly underneath his arm, and he pitched from the wall like a log thrown out into space. My foes reached the roof as I grasped the rope and went over.

“A rope—cut it!”

“No, after him!” shouted a dozen voices in answer.

I had slipped down half-way, I suppose, when the words arrested me. A dozen could follow by the rope; I could fight against odds no longer. Only a dagger was in my hand, a useless weapon against odds. The rope above me swayed. My first adversary was already sliding towards me. I was prepared; he would not be—all the difference in a fall. I drew my limbs together, and then, with a swift slash of my dagger, cut the rope above my head—and fell.

CHAPTER XXV

MY ENEMY IN THE RIVER

I FELL, still grasping the severed rope with my left hand, and still holding the dagger in my right. It seemed a long fall, and it was well for me that I landed on soft turf—well, too, that the contact with the ground threw me sprawling on my hands and knees away from the spot on which I fell. I was cut and bruised, but I escaped a worse fate. A shriek rent the night air as the man who had followed me came hurtling downwards. He was unprepared to fall, and struck the ground with a sickening thud. I struggled to my feet, and went to him. He was not dead, but he could not rise. I had nothing to fear from him, and I was glad that I was not forced to kill him for my own safety.

His shriek had stopped his comrades following him. There were torches flaring upon the walls above me, and men looked over to see what had happened. I crept under the wall, and waited.

“He’s escaped,” said one.

“Probably dead,” said another.

“To the gates!” cried a third.

It would take them some time to follow me by the city gates, but every moment was of importance to me. I was exhausted with my long fighting, and shaken by my fall. My legs were hardly strong

enough to support me as I moved along under the wall in the direction of the river. As I went, I took off my leather shirt and my coat of mail. The shirt I put on again, the mail coat I carried with me. To leave it might suggest to my pursuers the way I had taken. I stopped once or twice to listen. I could hear no sound. The city lay like a city of the dead, and I could hear no hurrying feet following me across the turf. Had my enemies been superstitious like those who served the Princess, they would have given up the search, when they did not find my mutilated body underneath the walls, believing that I had been spirited away; but the men I had to deal with now were no believers in the miraculous. There was no free breathing for me until I had crossed the river. I limped onwards, wondering if I had strength to fight across that breadth of water, so deep and so full of strange currents according to O'Ryan. The thought of O'Ryan gave me much to speculate upon. What could his actions mean? He had hunted me through the city, had cried the loudest for my destruction, and yet had been the means of my escape. His fight with me had given him the opportunity to speak; his falling back wounded had given me the time I needed to reach the roof. Doubtless he was traitor enough to save his own skin by betraying me, but for old friendship's sake was glad, as the opportunity occurred, that I should get away. It was the only explanation I could find.

I came to the river-bank. On my right the huge rock rose up into the darkness, before me the black water swirled angrily. I could not see the opposite bank. I knelt down, and, leaning as far over as possible, put my arm down into the water. It seemed

deep, and the bank sides were straight, as though they had been cut. I let the coat of mail drop into the water. It had served me well, but I could not carry it across with me. I should have enough to do to reach the other side. Then I let my dagger fall. I hated to part with so good a friend, but in the struggle before me I dared not carry it at my waist lest it should prove an enemy; I could not carry it between my teeth, for its night's work was yet warm upon it. Then I stretched myself, rubbed my arms and legs, and, sitting on the bank, let myself slip into the water. I dared not plunge in, not knowing how deep it was, nor what rocks lay hidden there. I slipped downwards, the waters rushed over my head, but I did not touch the bottom. I came to the surface, and, shaking myself, struck out, taking my direction from the rock.

I have always accounted myself a strong swimmer, but there were strange currents in that river. I was caught at once, and carried down stream away from the rock, yet swim as strongly as I could, I seemed to make little progress forward. Presently another current took me back again, even past the place where I had slipped in, close under the rock itself. I continued to swim with all my strength, knowing that the longer I was made a plaything of in this fashion, the less my chance of ever reaching the other side. I was not in fit condition for such a struggle as this. For a few moments my efforts seemed to leave the great rock further behind me; indeed, the current helped me, and then there was a new danger. My feet grew heavy. I struck out with my legs, and found it difficult to draw them in again for the next stroke. The water was sucked away from my body,

or seemed to be, until I found it almost impossible to keep my head above the water. This was worse than surface currents, carrying me this way and that—far worse.

The horror of it sapped my strength for a moment, and immediately I sank, the waters closing over my head with an oily deadliness. Desperately I struck upwards, and came to the surface again, only to be whirled round like a cork and drawn down again. Three times, four times I was sucked down and struggled up, and each time I drew a long breath, more weakly, each time felt more inclined to throw myself flat upon the water as though it were my bed and sleep. I felt death's cold fingers upon me, but they did not clutch me painfully, rather they soothed to rest. They would have hurt horribly in the fortress, which towered above, had they come with creaking winches and sharp-toothed machinery. This was a better death than that other. And as I thought this, the waters roared in my ears, and I sank gently, almost as a child nestles among its pillows. Darkness and the roaring in my head seemed natural. It was well that the struggle was over. But a man with life in him does not die so easily.

Above the roaring came a voice crying "Daria," a voice speaking of the future, of the sunlight; a glimmer of the good world even seemed to flicker across the blackness. A new strength ran through me, and again I rose to the surface, this time to know that the waters were hissing and dancing about me, mocking my efforts to cleave a path through them. But my feet were not so heavy; a strange chance had thrown me out of the suck. The hissing waters bore me away rapidly, and then as rapidly turned and

carried me back again. Had it been light I might have seen my best moment to make an effort to get out of them; but as it was, I could only struggle blindly, and my attempts were in vain. So I was carried backwards and forwards. Dimly I could see the rock, dimly I thought I could discern the opposite bank. I turned on my back to rest myself and prepare for a final effort. The dancing water splashed over my face, and I wondered how long it would be before I was drawn into that suck again.

Next time I should not escape, yet the wish to reach the opposite bank was stronger now than ever. I was carried back again. Would the end come this time? No; round I came. At the next turning I would make my effort, I told myself. I threw out my legs to test their strength, and then—— Was it the suck again? Surely not in the midst of these boiling waters. And yet unseen hands seemed to clutch my feet, something from the depths below to twine clammy arms about me to drag me down. I struck out with arms and legs, and for a moment was free, but only for a moment. As I turned upon my side, arms crept out of the water and crossed my body, and round my legs was a soft embrace. I struck wildly right and left, but could not free myself. All along my body some monster touched me, and the arms seemed to beat upon me. I turned in the water, as a porpoise does, to wrestle with my enemy, and as I shook the water from my eyes, my enemy and I were face to face, so close that our heads touched nearly. A man, naked, clinging to me, the waters rushing about us as though to blind us in everlasting embrace. One of his arms swung round as if to clutch me.

"Fool! I'm a desperate man," I cried aloud, marvelling that an enemy should have followed me so closely.

He made no answer, but lurched forward to grasp me.

"It's death to you to touch me," I said.

But he took no heed. The waters seemed to help him to throw his arm upon me, and in that moment I struck at his head. It seemed to dance away from me for a moment as a floating ball when hit might do, and then the current brought him to me again. He shot towards me, and we were side by side. For a moment he seemed helpless, and I had no strength to spare. I meant to save myself if I could, and he must pay for his folly in following me. With a swift stroke I threw myself upon him, and caught his throat. Even as I caught him we came to the spot where the current had turned me so many times, and carried me back again. Frantically, I buried my fingers in his throat. His arms touched me, but did not grasp me; his legs swung wide apart. There was no sound. With a cry of horror I let him go, and dived to avoid him. The man was dead. Only the dancing water had lent him life. I came to the surface to see the corpse twisting from me as the current took it back again. A new current had caught me. I could not guide myself. I was carried swiftly, without power to help myself. I could not think. A deadly sickness was in my throat. I forgot where I was and what had happened. My foot striking something hard momentarily aroused me. I stretched out my hands, and grasped land—grass. With a half-conscious effort I pulled myself from the water, and then fell forwards, prostrate and insensible.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE WOODCUTTER'S HUT

A GRAY dawn was glimmering over the mountains to the east when consciousness returned to me. I remembered things slowly. I saw the rock a long way up the river on the other side of it, and to my senses, half awake, there was a feeling of security in this fact. My limbs ached. The grass beneath me was long and soft, and for a time I thought of nothing else but lying there to rest. The day growing older roused me. I had been carried far by that last current before I was thrown upon the bank. I had crossed the river; but if my enemies suspected what I had done, they could cross it, too, by the bridge, and continue their search for me. It was not time to rest yet. Time enough for that when I had reached the comparative safety of some woods. I sat up; and then I remembered all that had happened last night. For the same current that had brought me to land had, later, brought my ghastly companion. He lay at my feet at the edge of the water, his face upwards, his open, sightless eyes staring at the gray sky. Yet there was a look in those eyes which made me wonder what it was they had last seen to fix them so. It was a strange look. Should I have lain so, with staring eyes to Heaven, if the suck had drawn me in, and cast me at the water's edge afterwards?

The thought carried my mind to that other death—that death of creaking winches and toothed machinery, and the possibility that occurred to me made me look at the man more closely. His limbs seemed long and loose; one arm was evidently broken. Could it be the prisoner who had made a friend of the executioner, and had died so easily? There was a blue mark round his neck where a rope had been. Had not Costa said that the weight tied to a corpse slipped sometimes? This man, too, had escaped from Yadasara, but by the way only dead men took.

I sprang to my feet. I was a fool to wait here, so close to that terrible fortress. It was light now. Safety for me lay only in the woods. My enemies might know the set of the currents in the river, and seek for my body in this very spot. I bathed my arms and legs, and then made quickly for the woods behind. I dared not keep to the open where lay my direct way. That would be safe only after dark.

It was well that I was wise in time, for even as I entered the wood, I saw a party of horsemen coming from the bridge. Some went along the river-bank, the others spread in twos and threes, fanlike, over the country. They did not intend me to escape. I plunged into the wood, keeping from trodden paths. There was thick undergrowth often difficult to tear a way through. I might easily lay concealed until nightfall. The day wore on. I was ready to drop with fatigue and hunger. I had to rest often. I broke off a stout stick to help me to walk, and to serve as a weapon in case of need. It would be a poor defence if I were once seen.

I came out from a thick piece of undergrowth on to a broad turf path, and then drew quickly back

again. Three horsemen had dismounted not two dozen yards away, and were lying upon a bank.

"If he's in the wood he'll have to starve or show himself. Every path is watched."

"There are plenty of hiding-places," said one man.

"But nothing to eat. It's only hunger conquers such men as Clinton," returned the first speaker.

"Well, for my part, I hope he's dead or got clear away," said the third man. "I'd sooner fight beside him than hunt him down."

"You're not alone in that wish," was the answer; "but if he's not caught some of us will suffer, and I'd sooner be the death of Clinton than turn food for flesh-screws and such like."

"Aye, it must be self first," said another.

From my leafy ambush I saw two other horsemen turn into the path.

"Not found yet?" called out one of the three I had first seen.

"No, and never will be," was the answer, and I recognized Costa. "I'd give a good deal to lay my hands upon him. I took a liking to him, and it's hard to know that one has loved a traitor."

"This traitor's a man, at least," said one.

"I shouldn't have taken a liking to him if he hadn't been."

"Now, Costa, wasn't it fear that made you civil?"

"Fear!"

"He tried his strength upon you before the King."

"Fear! Who speaks to me of fear?" asked the irritated Spaniard. "It is easy for him to prove his words if he can. The turf is excellent, and we have swords."

"And other work in hand," said another man.

"Leave friendly fighting until we have Clinton safe in Yadasara."

"We shall leave it long enough, then," Costa returned. "Clinton is dead."

"We ought to have found his body."

"The river has that," was the answer.

"It didn't keep the prisoner who died yesterday," said his companion. "He was lying on the bank, a sorry sight enough."

Presently all five mounted and rode slowly up the path, and I crept through the underwood again. Perhaps I should have been safer had I stopped where I was, but inaction was impossible. Besides, hunger and thirst were prompting me. A few berries might be found, and a stream.

I had not gone far when I heard other voices. There was another path, and enemies patrolling it. I was hemmed into a very small space, and at any moment the sudden cracking of twigs might raise the alarm. I waited until the sound of the men's voices died in the distance, and then began to retrace my steps, returning, as I thought, the way I had come. It is difficult to keep a certain course in a wood, and I must have wandered far out of my way, for I came suddenly upon a small clearing. A hut built of stout logs was there, and before it was an old woman facing half-a-dozen horsemen.

"You've searched," she was saying. "There's not a hole where a man could lie concealed. What have I to do with your fighting?"

"You have seen no man pass this way to-day!"

"No. I was within, and the door was shut."

"Shut? All the day?"

"Aye, all day," answered the woman. "And it

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would have been the same had it been open. No one passes."

"Some one has passed."

"Not close enough for me to see. I'm getting old, and cannot see far."

"You can see me, I suppose?"

"My eyes wouldn't know you again, but my ears would. You speak roughly to an old woman."

"Oh, you're not deaf as well as blind?" said the horseman who was the spokesman of the party.

"No. Is that all you want of me, for I hear the pot boiling within."

"Good ears, at any rate. Mark you, dame, there is a man wandering in these woods, and he'll want food. Maybe he'll ask you for it. If you give it, this hut will be without an owner. Were he your son, even, you should not escape!"

"Maybe not, but I'd chance that, and give him food, if——"

The horseman muttered a threatening oath.

"If he were my son, sir," said the old woman, "I care for no other man."

"Have you a son?"

"Aye."

"Where is he?"

The woman shook her head.

"Maybe hunting a man as you are. He's a soldier."

"And fights for the King."

"Fights for himself, I think, sir. He saw more profit in it than wood-cutting."

"All good men fight for the King."

"Then surely it is the King he fights for, since my son is a good man."

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"Well, dame, remember my words. It is not your son we're looking for."

The horsemen turned, and left the old woman standing at her hut door. As soon as they were out of sight she shook her fist at them. The action made me wonder if I could trust her. Within the hut, doubtless, was food and drink, and both I sorely needed; perhaps, too, a corner where I could rest a little.

She stood at the door for a few moments, and then came to the side of the hut to pick up a bundle of sticks. It was risky, but I was almost fainting for want of food.

Holding up my hand in warning, I stepped into the clearing. She saw me, and let the sticks fall, but she did not utter a sound.

"They are for the King," I whispered. "I am for the Princess. Who is your son for?"

"The Princess."

"You will not betray me?"

"To them?" she exclaimed, pointing to where the horsemen had disappeared.

"You will give me food?"

"Aye."

She beckoned me to follow her, and I entered the hut.

"Food and a safe hiding-place," she said, shutting the door and making it fast. "You're sorely hurt."

"I have come through a great deal since yesterday. Last night I escaped from Yadasara."

She busied herself about a pot that swung suspended over a wood fire.

"You shall eat first, and, if you will, tell me the tale afterwards."

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It was frugal fare she set before me, such a pottage that at other times my stomach might have turned against, but now enjoyable as the dainty feast of an epicure; and then I told her a garbled version of my story, true enough in particulars, but wanting in detail. It was a poor return, perhaps, for her faith in me, but I had Daria to think of as well as myself. This peasant woman looked upon me merely as a soldier in the service of the Princess, even as her son was, and, indeed, I looked a sorry man to fight for so fair a mistress. My good hostess might well think it presumption on my part if I hinted at my love.

"You're a brave man," she said. "My son would have acted so, for he is a brave man, too. Now let me look to your wounds. Living in the woods, we old women find strange herbs."

She could not have used me more tenderly had I been her son. In the midst of her work she stopped suddenly. She had quick ears.

"They are returning."

"Good mother, give me some weapon, and my life shall stand between them and you."

"There is a better way," she answered. "I said I could give you food and a hiding-place. Come with me."

She led me into a small back-room, and pushing some faggots back from a corner, opened a trap.

"It's a well," she said; "but it's something more. Catch hold of the rope, hang at arm's length, and your feet will feel a ledge. It is the floor of a little hiding-place, and safe enough, I warrant. Quick, they are at the door."

She replaced the lid of the trap, and I heard her sweep the faggots over it as I swung myself into the

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hiding-place, a fair-sized kind of cellar under the hut. By the noise above I could hear that several men had entered. I could hear the murmur of their voices, but could catch no words. The hut was evidently carefully searched again, the trap was even opened, but the hole was so clearly a well that none suspected a hiding-place.

"Your game will be beyond your reach, if you stop to search such places as this twice," I heard the woman say while the trap was open.

"Your face is not the honestest I know of, dame," a man retorted.

"It is ill work abusing an old woman, Master Captain, whose son is not at hand to defend her. Maybe you dare not do it if he were."

"Enough, dame. I'm short in the temper, and may forget both your sex and your years."

"I spoke but doubtfully," she answered. "You may be the bravest man in the country—I can't tell as I have seen only one side of you; but, little as I know you, I don't fear that you'll remember that you are a man and I an old woman."

The words caused a laugh at the short-tempered comrade's expense, and his muttered oath was cut short, as far as I was concerned, by the closing of the well lid.

For three days I lay hidden, chiefly in the well, but sometimes climbing into the hut when the woman thought it safe for me to do so. More than once the men paid surprise visits, once nearly catching me, and so well was the wood watched that even at night it was not safe for me to start upon my journey. It was not only this particular wood which was watched, but all round the country I was being looked for, the

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old woman told me. I fretted at the delay, but there is little doubt that it was good for me. I got a much-needed rest, and my wounds healed somewhat.

It was on the fourth night that I set out upon my journey. The King's men had withdrawn, convinced that I was not concealed in the wood. The woman told me which path I should take to reach the open country towards my destination, and she provided me with a short dagger, the only weapon she had. Her blessing, too, she gave me at parting—a good gift, for never without a shield is he who carries a blessing, be it bestowed by the palsied hands of age, or lisped from the lips of a little child.

I was in the Princess's country, but I shunned habitations, and avoided a village as the plague. Since the enemy had been allowed to roam so far over the country in search of me, I could not tell to what length the treachery against the Princess had gone. That her warriors had not come out to defend their borders seemed to speak ill of their loyalty. I went carefully day and night, keeping to the woods as much as possible, choosing to make a roundabout journey rather than go direct, with the chance of being seen.

It was on the sixth—or perhaps the seventh—day, for I took little heed of the passing of time, that I climbed the steep road close to the place where O'Ryan and his party had been attacked on the occasion of my first journey to Drussenland. The end of my wandering was in sight, but carelessness should not defeat me at the last. I did not forget that here I had as many and as bitter enemies as I had in Yadasara. I rested until nightfall, and then proceeded.

To gain the private door, by which I escaped, and by which I intended to return, I had to cross in front of the camp, and climb the opposite hill spur. I went slowly, looking for the first lights of the camp, and listening for the tramp of the sentries on this side the hill. I reached the spur from which I knew the whole camp was visible. No sentry disturbed me, only a light here and there was visible. Something had happened. I imagined that the desertion had already taken place, and, anxious to learn the worst, I quickened my steps. Making a wide detour round the camp, I ascended the opposite spur, hardly expecting to be challenged now. There was no time to lose. If a large part of her army had deserted—which would explain why the King's troops had wandered unchallenged over the country—the sooner the Princess and I set out to find the exit from Drussenland the better. A few loyal knights were surely left within the city, and a few determined men can do much.

I found the secret door, and opened it. With my dagger in my hand, I groped my way along the dark passages, not certain of my direction. There was not a sound. The palace seemed deserted, and my heart failed me. Had I come back accomplishing so much, only to find disappointment at the end of the journey? One forgets that enduring hardships does not necessarily ensure success.

I had to retrace my steps more than once, finding that I had come the wrong way, but at last I came to the corridor in which the Princess's rooms were. There was no light in it, not a sound. I stood still and listened. Not a sound. Yes, a little sound, the slight creak of armor. Friend or foe, he was too

near the Princess for me to wish to avoid him. So I went forwards, taking no further care to step lightly.

“Who goes?”

“A friend.”

“That name may stand for a foe, now,” he answered.

I heard him strike a door with his sword. It was the Princess’s door, and at his summons two men came out bearing torches.

“Let us see the features of a friend, though, for that matter, features have lied amazingly.”

“What has happened?” I said, hurrying forwards, for in the torchlight I recognized the knight.

“Verrall!” he exclaimed. “You come too late, I fear.”

“Too late!”

“The Princess is gone.”

“Gone! Where?”

“Towards Yadasara.”

“To her death,” I cried, and I put out my arm to the wall to support myself.

CHAPTER XXVII**THE KNIGHT'S STORY**

HE held out his arm for me to lean upon. Doubtless I looked a sorry figure, earth-stained and in rags, but, almost brusquely I fear, I pushed his arm aside. This was no time to give way to fatigue or despair. It was the time to act and to act quickly.

"My watch is over," said the knight. "I waited only for you. You look spent, Sir Verrall; I will send for food and wine."

I did not prevent him.

One of the soldiers left us, the other led us into the Princess's apartments. He knocked out his torch and remained in the ante-room. The knight and I passed into the chamber I knew so well. A single light was burning there, which did not serve to dispel the gloom. Without in Daria's garden it was dark, the wind sighing a monotonous chant in the trees. Within everything seemed unreal. It was a room of shadows, of memories, suggesting that the happiness I had known there was dead. Though not exactly in confusion, there were signs of a hasty departure. The couches were pushed from their places, and some of the rugs from them lay crumpled on the floor. I stooped to pick up a piece of some white material which lay on the open hearth. It had been torn evidently from a woman's dress. I thought I

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remembered Daria wearing a dress of such stuff. Why was it torn so?

"They went in haste?" I said.

"In great haste at the last, Sir Verrall," answered the knight.

"Tell me all."

"It was not for naught that we took an oath to defend the Princess with our lives. We found it well to talk much and loudly of it, making boast of more than we could have performed doubtless, but it served to keep the malcontents in check. You had promised to go in three days, and when it was found that you had departed secretly, reaction came in favor of the priests and of Vasca. At the street corners men talked treachery. To Sir Walen, and others whom she trusted, the Princess told the reason and the manner of your going. It was wise to be secret doubtless, but it gave great occasion to your enemies."

"To have delayed would have given greater occasion," I answered.

"The Princess threatened to treat those who murmured with the greatest severity. Indeed she has ruled with an iron hand in these last days, but she did not stop the murmuring. It wanted but a word from some one powerful enough to lead, to set fire to rebellion."

"And Count Vasca did not speak the word?" I asked.

"He used his influence to stay rebellion."

"And he succeeded?"

"Yes, in that, and in a more dangerous matter. He caused many of the knights who had little reason to trust him, to waver in their opinion. He played

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upon them cunningly as a musician caresses the instrument from the strings of which he draws music. They were not less loyal, but they said that the Count might be more loyal than they believed."

"Fools!" I exclaimed.

"They were loyal, Sir Verrall. They relaxed nothing of their vigilance."

"How can vigilance be keen when suspicion is lulled to rest? As well say that he is prepared to fight who sleeps fast. That we are here alone proves their vigilance a sorry thing."

"No one could stay the Princess," he returned. "You were in danger she said, and that was an all sufficient reason for her going."

The strip of the torn gown was upon my knee. I felt its softness between my fingers. For me Daria had gone, recking nothing of danger and death for my sake.

"Who told her of my danger?" I asked.

"Those about her wondered at your long delay," was the answer.

"You heard them speak of it?"

"Yes, Sir Verrall. I have been privileged to attend closely upon the Princess. I think she was ever on the tip-toe of expectancy. The sound of a closing door, or of a footstep in the ante-room made her start and listen. At the sound of horses' hoofs on the courtyard stones I have seen her rush to see what rider came."

"Did Vasca persuade her to set out for Yadasara?"

"At first, no."

"Ah! The time was not ripe."

"She liked not his advice," he went on. "I remember her words, for she spoke angrily, 'It would not be

unpleasant to you, Count, if the knight should never ride into our gates again. You were ever his enemy! He bore her resentment well. It was a hard accusation."

"But a true one, Sir Knight, I have full proof."

"The accusation was ill-timed, Sir Verrall. Her enemies used it against her. 'Our Princess loves the knight more than she loves Drussenland,' they said. 'For him she would sacrifice us. It is the way of a woman when she loves.'"

"And were there none loyal enough to silence such lying tongues."

"There were too few of us to do that, Sir Verrall, for the whole city spoke so."

"Even in your words, Sir Knight, there is something of accusation against her."

"Not an accusation," he answered. "I, as others, have sworn fealty to our virgin ruler, and to him amongst us who shall win her; therefore my sword is ever at her service, and at yours."

I looked at him. He knew my secret. The whole city knew it. Yet I did not confess.

"Tongues have been busily at work," I said.

"Speaking truly in this, Sir Verrall."

It was half a declaration, half a question. I did not deny the one, nor would I answer the other.

"Have you noted the Lady Aldrida during these days?" I asked.

"She has not been to Court, being ill."

I smiled. I knew another reason why she had not been to Court.

"The Princess departed in haste at last, you say."

"In great haste. Early yesterday the forces moved

towards Yadasara. We tried to prevent her, fearing treachery. Count Vasca is in command."

"She made her peace with him?"

"Rather, Sir Verrall, he made his peace with her. Two nights ago a man of Yadasara was brought captive into the camp. The Count questioned him concerning you."

"You heard the questioning?"

"Not the Count's. The man was brought privately to the Princess, and I heard her questions. The man declared that you were in great danger, that it was known you were a spy and that you were likely to meet a quick reckoning, might even already have done so."

"A foul plot," I said between my teeth.

"I marked the Princess as he spoke," he went on. Her face had no color in it, and the red of her lips turned grey. A light grew in her eyes that I had never seen there before, nor in the eyes of any woman, a light as that along the edge of a sword drawn for vengeance; there was no mercy in it. When she spoke it was another voice than hers, hard as a man's in passion. We were in this room, and as she gave her orders she caught her dress in her hand so sharply that she rent it. You have the piece upon your knee. Not the boldest rebel would have dared to disobey her just then."

"And Vasca?"

"He applauded her prompt action. 'Your Highness has doubted my loyalty,' he said. 'I lately persuaded you to stay, for Sir Verrall's long delay did not appear strange to me. He who spies in an enemy's country needs time for his work and oppor-

tunity for his escape. Now that we know the danger to him who is risking his life for Drussenland what private rivalry there has been between us is past, is nothing, is forgotten. With your Highness I cry, 'To arms!' The Princess gave him her hand and the color came back into her cheek. So the Count made his peace."

"A villain! A damnable villain!" The words hissed through my teeth. My fingers gripped my palms. I thought of Vasca's throat, aching to have it in my fingers' grasp.

The knight took no notice of my words.

"All night the town rang with preparation. There was the ring of steel in the streets, and the tramp of firm feet as the men went to the gates. The flare of a thousand torches painted the black night crimson. Men, aye and women, too, shouted jubilantly, 'To arms! On towards Yadasara!' The day dawned, leaden grey, with a swish of fine rain, yet a gleam of sunlight shone as the Princess came from the palace. She rode, a warrior in complete steel, and a shout rang loud and high at her coming. I warrant the sight of her turned many a traitor into a loyal subject."

"Heaven grant it so. But there is the foulest treachery afoot, Sir Knight. That captive was no captive, but a messenger proclaiming to the Count that the time was ripe."

"We feared treachery, Sir Verrall, but we were powerless except to follow the Princess. Of those who swore to protect her, I alone am here. It was Jasar who suggested that I should wait for you."

"Who is with you that you can trust?"

"A dozen men."

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"We must follow them, at once, to-night."

"Here is food and wine, you need it," said the knight. "Tell me how deep is the treachery."

"So deep that death grips hands with loyalty. In Yadasara there are many for the Count. In Yadasara Lady Aldrida attempted my life. Ten days ago, at least, I escaped from the city. You may judge what truth there was in the messenger the Count brought to the Princess."

And while I ate I told him of my adventures.

"Let me change these rags for armor and we will go," I cried, draining the wine. It put new strength in me.

"Shall we leave the city unprotected?"

"Every man who wields a loyal sword is necessary to the Princess now," I answered. "Have your men by the gates in half-an-hour."

He asked no further questions. He gave his orders to the soldiers and then went with me to my quarters. The town was unsafe for me should I be recognized.

So at midnight we rode from the gates. Strange that after running away from Yadasara, I should so eagerly ride towards it again. The terrors of the grim city were as nothing to my fears for the woman I loved. Love is madness perchance, but madness with virtue in it. It has power to lend even a coward courage, and to whip an ordinary man into a veritable hero.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A GREAT VILLAIN

WE rode fast through the night.

"We must be ignorant of Vasca's villainy until we have consulted with the Princess," I said.

We had ridden direct towards Yadasara, but at dawn we could see no signs of a camp, nor place where a camp had been.

"Vasca has evidently not taken a direct way," said the knight, as we watered our horses in the shade of a wood. Being a small party, we avoided the open country as soon as dawn came.

"Would the Princess consent to such a delay?"

"He would advise, and as yet she does not know him for a villain."

"Can we be too late, think you?"

"No. We have travelled quicker than a large body of men would. As there is such a vile plot on hand, there is probably a place appointed for the fulfilment of it—a place where the enemy can be hidden, and wait for the signal. You may be sure, Sir Verrall, that an easy victory is expected. Men, turned traitors, set great value on their lives."

It was towards sundown that we found the camp, pitched in a place surrounded by thick woods, and it was fortunate that our coming happened upon a point

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where friends were, or we might have been intentionally mistaken for the enemy.

I thought it well that my presence in the camp should not be generally known until I had seen the Princess, so entering a tent, I sent to ask Jasar and Walen to come to me. They would know better than I could who was to be trusted and who not. That Walen had insisted on leaving a knight behind to await my return and warn me, proved that he was not without fear regarding this expedition. His knowledge, however, was not of much worth. He listened to my story attentively, but did not seem inclined to put so grave an interpretation upon it as I did.

"I do not think Vasca so great a villain as you imagine him," he said.

"Then why are you encamped here? Was there no better ground to choose than this, surrounded by woods where five thousand men can gather noiselessly in the night, and listen for the signal to attack?"

"I have always considered him weak as a leader," he answered. "I do not see that this proves his treachery."

"His plans are common talk in Yadasara," I went on. "I was but one of the King's guard there—no knight to hear such plans discussed in council, and from the lips of the soldiers I heard of Vasca's treachery, and had to echo laudation of his cunning. Such common news has the mark of truth upon it."

Walen shook his head, still unconvinced.

"Must you feel the knife at your throat before you recognize an enemy?" I asked rather angrily.

"I cannot understand such treachery, Sir Verrall," he answered.

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"Yes it would explain much that has happened," said Jasar. "Why should the Count have been so anxious for her Highness to accompany this expedition?"

"Many reasons could be found," said Walen. "His ambition prompted his anxiety; he made no secret of it. Jealous of you, Sir Verrall, he conceived himself able to place her Highness on the throne in Yadasara, and having done so, might he not expect that any request he made would be granted?"

"Did he give this as his reason?"

"Yes."

"To the Princess?" I asked.

"He could not."

"You defend him well, Sir Walen. Believe me, he is not worthy such trust. Tell me what men in the camp can you thoroughly rely upon?"

He told me of certain companies—would, indeed, have prolonged the list to include nearly all the force had I not stopped him.

"You trust too easily," I said.

"'Tis you who trust too little," he retorted angrily.

We might have quarrelled sharply, but Jasar interposed.

"This is ill work for friends," he said.

I could not afford to lose a friend, so held out my hand, and Walen took it.

"Forgive me," I said. "Your anger is honest. I am trying to guard against smiling treachery. Those companies we can trust shall be kept together when we meet the enemy."

He was only half appeased.

"I have not the command," he said.

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"You and I will have sufficient command for that to-morrow," I answered.

Turning to Jasar, I asked when I could see the Princess alone.

"When you will. She will not leave her tent again to-night. Shall I go to her and tell her you are here?"

"Is it dark enough for me to pass through the camp unnoticed?" I said.

Jasar raised the canvas at the entrance of the tent.

"Yes."

"Then I will come now."

Walen left us, and his manner troubled me. To him more than to any other knight I looked for support, and if he had not actually failed me, he had clearly shown that he was not ready to follow me blindfold. If he were so difficult to manage, how could I trust those others, many of whom had been only lukewarm friends at the best?

"Sir Walen troubles you?" said Jasar, after looking at me keenly for some moments.

"A little."

"The Count has taken pains to lull suspicions to sleep. His tongue is persuasive as a woman's when he will."

"A woman's tongue could not persuade me in such a matter."

"No?" and the smile I knew so well wrinkled the corners of his mouth. "I have heard men speak like that often, before the woman's tongue had charmed; afterwards——"

He shrugged his shoulders, and swept man's strength aside with a little wave of his hand.

"You are wise; but all other men are not fools."

"Most men may be if a woman tempts them. I claim no exemption, even for myself."

"And show your wisdom by so humbly judging yourself, you would say?"

"The priest's garments cover, after all, only a man, Sir Verrall. They do not kill the passions that are in him. Think you to the priest one woman is as fair as another, that there is no temptation, that love lies like a fallen leaf crushed underfoot, that he can stand aside watching the keen desires of other men without feeling the touch of them himself? I, priest as I am, love one woman before all the world. Were she to persuade me, I might be a fool as most other men may be fools."

A light dawned upon me, not by reason of his words, but by something in his manner, in his voice.

"One woman?" I said, and our eyes met steadily.

"One woman," he answered. And I knew that he spoke of the Princess.

There was a pause.

"You may trust Sir Walen," he said presently.

"He is as loyal as you are—as I am; but love has not made him so keen to see danger. When the moment to strike comes he will strike the heavier because he has been deceived. Shall we go? Mark you, Sir Verrall, her Highness will not be easily persuaded to distrust the Count. It is not easy to believe that those we have trusted can be false."

We went silently through the camp. We passed Vasca's tent, and heard the sound of feasting within. It struck me that there was a lack of discipline throughout, and my anxiety for the future would have been greater had not the thought that I was to see Daria again thrown all other thoughts into the cor-

ners of my brain. Jasar was right. All men in love have the capacity for being made fools of. Well for them if a good woman rules them.

The tent was well guarded. The priest went in, and in a few moments returned. I entered alone.

Daria had risen to greet me. As the curtain of the tent fell behind me, she seemed undecided whether to come to the arms ready to be held out to her, whether to be all the woman or still something of the Princess. Perhaps to both of us there came a doubt whether that whisper at our parting, that kiss and farewell, had been thoroughly understood by the other. It was hardly strange that she hesitated and remained standing apart waiting for me to speak, that I did not at once act as an accepted lover. Love had been whispered only for a moment, and one fears to act certainly upon a whisper. But the true woman shone in her face. Jasar's tidings of my return had brought the color to her cheeks, and in her eyes lay more than could ever lie in the eyes of a Princess only. I think just then she regretted that only a flowing cloak covered her suit of armor. I forgot who she was, what I was in this country of Drussenland, remembering only that she was a beautiful woman on God's earth, and that I was a man who loved her.

"Daria."

I doubt not that there was supplication in my tone, in my attitude, as I opened my arms to her. If for a moment she had doubted the reality of that farewell whisper of love, the doubt was dispelled as I spoke her name. She crept into my arms with a little sigh which was sufficient answer to all my desires, and in a long silence, while her lips met mine, I felt rewarded for all I had come through. I seemed to have

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reached the haven where I would be, and in my happiness I forgot for a while the dangers that so thickly surrounded us.

"You are safe and with me again," she said presently.

Her words brought me back to the reality of our position. I led her to a couch, and sat beside her, holding her hand.

"With you to defend you," I answered. "But happiness must not make me forgetful. My darling, peril is at our door."

"I fear nothing—now," she answered.

And I kissed her for the pause she made before the last word.

"Do you remember why you are here?" I asked.

"I had almost forgotten."

"You are on your way to Yadasara to rescue me."

"And now you have come. Yet it does not appear wonderful. It seems natural that you should come to me. In my deepest anxiety I have felt that your life and mine were one. Ah, Clinton, in your country women may not speak their hearts so. Forgive me if my confession sounds strange to you, but love has come to me once and for all time; there seems no sin in telling it."

"I could sit beside you listening to such confessions without a thought of to-morrow, of the future. But, my dear one, between us and our happiness lie grave dangers. You must remember why you are here, how you were persuaded to come, and listen to the tale of my adventures since we parted."

With her hand in mine I told her all, not exaggerating, yet not making too light of my perils, for love glowed brighter in her eyes as I told the story. She

loved me more for what I had endured, and grasped my hand tightly as I recounted Lady Aldrida's attempt upon my life, the fight on the stairs, the fall from the city walls, and the struggle with the dead man in the river. I finished, and waited for her to speak.

"You would have me believe my kinsman, Count Vasca, the greatest of villains?" she said.

"I have told you what is said of him in Yadasara, common talk over every flagon of wine. I believe it was he who sent Lady Aldrida to the King."

"He cannot be so great a traitor."

"Think you he would have devised this expedition to save me? Have I a greater enemy in Drussenland than Count Vasca?"

"A private quarrel."

"A private quarrel if you will," I answered, "but deadly enough to make him use any means against me."

"Even treachery to his sovereign?"

"Yes, Daria, even that."

"I will not believe it."

"He loves you. As the woman he loves, you are far more than as the Princess he pays homage to. Once he has betrayed you, you are a Princess no longer. He believes he could make terms with the woman."

"It is unlike you, Clinton, to make a man out so vile as this."

"Let me learn that I have wronged him, and on my knees I will ask his pardon," I returned. "Why, Daria, look at the place where you are encamped to-night! Would any leader choose such a position?"

"Indeed, he gave me many reasons for doing so."

“Speaking lies, Daria.”

“Hush, Clinton, he is my kinsman.”

“He is your worst enemy—a treacherous friend. Why should he so urge your coming? Is the thick of battle a safe place for you?”

“I command, Clinton. That should put double courage into the men.”

“Into loyal men. Your camp is full of men who are not loyal.”

“I will not believe that.”

“You must believe it, Daria. Would that our safety allowed me to fling a challenge to the Count to prove his honesty. I cannot; the treachery is too widespread, and, with insidious words, he has lulled your suspicions even as he has those of some of your most loyal knights. That messenger who came to you came with a lie upon his lips. Sir Walen almost quarrelled with me when I accused the Count; and you, my dear one, doubt me.”

“No, Clinton, do not say that; but, surely, you may misjudge the Count.”

“Believe that I do not; it is safer. You command. Send for Sir Walen, and he will tell you of certain companies he can trust in. When we move to-morrow, order that these companies form one wing of the army. So shall we concentrate our strength, and you shall ride in the midst of us, unless—— Why, indeed, should you go on?”

“Clinton, I have been wondering why you did not suggest that I should return,” she said. “Since you are here, the reason for this expedition is gone, but your presence is reason enough why I cannot return. There is no happiness behind us. Only by conquest can I hope to make the Drussenlanders respect you.”

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I shook my head. I could not expect conquest.

"Are you faint-hearted?" she asked. "Must I put courage into you, too?"

She stood before me, beautiful and brave.

"I have caught hold of happiness, Daria. It makes me afraid to think that I may lose it."

"Are we not together, you and I?" And she took both my hands. "Our lives are henceforth one life, and if Death even now stands sentinel at the door, our deaths shall be one death. Courage, my knight. The blood leaps too warmly through my veins for me to fear. We shall not fail. In Yadasara, did you find the key of Drussenland?"

"No."

"We may have to seek it together."

"Would that we could start the quest to-night."

"We have not failed yet," she answered. "I will send for Sir Walen at once."

She would not admit that I was right regarding Count Vasca, but I think she was convinced that somewhere there was treachery. She gave her orders sharply. It was wonderful how easily she became the Princess.

"If there is danger, we will at least be ready for it," she said.

Sir Walen came, and Jasar was also admitted to the conference at my suggestion.

"You know what Sir Verrall fears," she said to Walen, when he had named the companies he could trust. "We think his anxiety for our safety outruns his judgment; but, if it is so, it is a fault well founded in loyalty. We must be prepared. Sir Walen, you will at once see that these companies are drawn together. They will form one wing of our ad-

vancing army, which you and Sir Verrall will command. It will be for you to protect our person. See to our command at once."

Sir Walen bowed, and left the tent.

"Jasar, send a messenger to the Count, and bid him come to us. Stay. Can he know that Sir Verrall has returned?"

"No, your Highness."

"Then send to him. Say nothing of Sir Verrall."

"What are you going to do?" I asked, when Jasar had left us.

"I am taking your advice, and preparing for danger. Are you not satisfied?"

"It would be well to treat the Count carefully."

"I wish to give him my instructions, that is all. You shall hear them. Go in here."

She lifted the canvas that covered a small apartment of the tent, and I went in.

"You are not to show yourself. Remember, I command," and then she laughed. "But I love, too."

Vasca came, not too quickly upon his bidding, and drawing the canvas a little aside I could see him. We had heard the sound of feasting in his tent as we passed; his face bore evidence to the feast. Perchance he had sought to stifle the whisperings of conscience somewhat.

"Sir Vasca, we like not the place of this camp."

"It is well hidden from the enemy."

"And too enclosed for action should the enemy find it," she returned promptly.

"I have already given my reasons for choosing it."

"And after thinking over them we find them bad ones. We have a cunning enemy to deal with. When

we march we will change the disposal of our forces somewhat, else we may fall into a trap in these woods which surround us. You will place certain companies in the centre as a main body, and throw out two wings to protect us on either hand. You will hold command of the main body, and place the knight you deem most fitted in command of the right wing. We have already instructed Sir Walen to gather certain companies to form the left wing."

"I would that your Highness had first consulted with me."

"We have our own wishes to consult, Count. Our presence here means that we are in command."

"Your Highness mistakes me."

"We fear we have sometimes forgotten to command enough," was her quiet answer.

I saw that the Count choked down his rising anger.

"Who commands the left wing?" he asked.

"Sir Walen and Sir Verrall."

"Sir Verrall!"

The name seemed to strike him as though he had received a blow.

"Did you not know he had returned to-night? His knowledge will be of great moment to us."

She said it so innocently that I think he was deceived.

"I was not told of his coming. His escape makes this expedition useless, your Highness."

"Before us lies the capital, Count. There is no turning back."

"I rejoice to hear you say that," he answered.

The scoundrel! I could well believe him.

"You understand how the troops will move?"

He bowed.

"Then strike the camp."

"It shall be done at dawn, your Highness."

"Now, Count Vasca—to-night."

"Your Highness——"

"To-night, we say."

Vasca was bewildered. It was a good move. By his consternation I judged that his plans were not yet ripe. The Princess had spoken truly. We had not yet failed.

"Consider, your Highness," he began.

"We have considered. The camp is to be struck silently. We march to-night."

CHAPTER XXIX

BATTLE AND DEFEAT

WITHIN two hours the camp was struck. The Count and I met as the forces were about to move.

"I have only just heard of your return, Sir Verrall. I congratulate you."

I thanked him.

"Is it by your advice that we move the camp to-night?" he asked.

"No. I had no idea such a movement was contemplated."

"It is folly to attempt to move a large force of men through the woods to-night," he said impatiently.

"It is difficult, certainly. Doubtless her Highness has reason for her actions."

"Reason! It is a whim, no more nor less."

"You would have had a freer hand, Count, had you not brought her upon this expedition."

"I made a mistake," he answered.

"A grave one, Count. You must have a care that it does not lead you to destruction."

"You speak in riddles, Sir Verrall."

"Not such deep ones but that you can read them," I answered. "Indeed, it is a warning that I give rather than a riddle I ask. You friends may be many, Count Vasca, but you have many enemies, too."

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"One stands before me," he said quickly.

"He might become a friend. It is not too late to ask him."

"One is apt to seek the friendship of a man he fears," he answered.

"In other words, it is too late," I returned quietly. "As you will. We should, perhaps, make poor friends. I doubt not we shall be very good enemies. It is well to know how we stand towards each other, Count Vasca. I always watch my enemies."

"And I always crush mine, Sir Verrall, sooner or later."

"You will have much to do, then, for in Yadasara they speak freely of Count Vasca, and they laugh, too. You know how enemies do laugh sometimes when they store up cunning for him who uses cunning."

"I crush my enemies, Sir Verrall," he said again. "You may yet regret that you have avowed yourself my enemy."

"I come but recently from Yadasara, Count. Remember that. I heard enough to make me glad that I am not your friend."

"You choose a coward's time to speak your insults—a time when it is impossible for me to punish you."

"The time will come, Count."

"It shall come!" he hissed.

He turned from me, and disappeared in the darkness.

I was as far as ever from discovering how matured the Count's plans were. I judged that the hurried moving of the camp did not suit his schemes altogether, but that it would have the effect of frustrating them I doubted. He would not have ventured upon

such treachery had he not every prospect of success, and my hopes grew weaker as the main body and the right wing moved forwards. If they were all traitors, what hope was there? Sir Walen thoroughly trusted the left wing, and I was the more inclined to think that he did so justly, when I saw the pleasure of the men at the fact that the Princess was to ride amongst them. They welcomed me, too.

It was a difficult night march. Under ordinary circumstances it would have been a foolish one. The woods were thick, and the paths through them narrow. The men were forced in places to straggle and push forwards in twos and threes. A well-planned attack at any moment of that night march would have meant defeat for us. And each moment I expected an attack. I wondered that it was delayed so long. Whether it was that he had been given joint command with me on the left wing, or that on consideration he found more reason to doubt the Count, I cannot say, but Sir Walen now entered thoroughly into all my plans. We instructed the men that in case of attack they were to fall back and surround the Princess. Her protection was to be their especial care. This arranged, Sir Walen took command, keeping as close to the main body as possible, while Jasar and I rode on either side of the Princess. Jasar was mounted on a strong animal, and I saw a sword-hilt peep from under his cloak. He was a man of peace; but there are times when even such a man should be ready and willing to strike a blow. I knew that in defence of the woman who rode between us he would strike well, and be no mean adversary.

We spoke little. Our horses wanted care, and I was alive to every sound. Were we leaving danger

behind us, or steadily, step by step, drawing nearer to it? Once I almost suggested to Daria that we should drop behind, and then make a dash together for liberty, for the hidden entrance to Drussenland. I did not suggest it; she would not have come had I done so, but that I should think of so desperate a means of safety, so mean a desertion of our friends, shows how little hope I had that we were leaving the danger behind us.

"It is a long night," said the Princess once.

"We will call a halt at daybreak, and you can rest. Did you sleep last night?"

"Yes."

"Well—really well?"

"It rested me. I had much to think of."

I leant from my saddle towards her.

"Of me?" I whispered.

"I shall sleep better now that I know you are near me," she answered.

The stumbling of Jasar's horse startled me.

"Heard you anything besides the tramping of our men, Sir Verrall?" he asked.

"No. Where?"

"To our right. Listen!"

I pulled up my horse. So did Daria hers.

"It may have been fancy, or an echo; but—There, is it not distinct?"

I could hear the steady tramp of our own men around us; but there was another sound away to our right, a faint echoing tramp.

"An echo, I think."

And then, as if in contradiction, there came a clear sound, the jingle of harness, faint but clear, as when in a company of horsemen, several of the animals

throw their heads up at the same time, and shake their bridles.

“That cannot be an echo.”

We rode on again, and overtaking a knight I told him to hurry forwards and tell Sir Walen that I believed the enemy were marching with us through the woods.

“It will be the battle first, the rest afterwards,” said Daria. I think she knew how hopeless I was, and said it to encourage me.

I am not a coward. I feel compelled to say it, even as I kept repeating it to myself as we tramped through the night. I was convinced that we were steadily marching to our doom, for the enemy was on one side of us, and false friends on the other. Presently the knight I had sent forward returned. Sir Walen had instructed the men to go slowly, and to keep well together, and he wanted me to make sure that I had plenty of men behind me to repulse any attack which might be made in the rear. Leaving the Princess in Jasar’s charge, I rode back, and got the rear portion of the left wing close up. With an effort I spoke gaily to the men, and I was convinced now that they were to be trusted. The battle would be against tremendous odds, but it would be between true men and traitors. Fate should fight on the side of truth.

Then I rejoined Daria and Jasar.

The wood was thinning a little. Gradually the men closed in around us as the path became less difficult, and a faint glimmer overhead heralded the dawn. A bird at intervals gave his first morning note, and a breeze stirred the leaves above us.

“It would be well to send forward to the Count,

and call a halt," I said. "We are approaching open country, and we cannot tell what awaits us there."

"Act as you think best," Daria answered.

I sent forward to Vasca, and in the Princess's name called a halt. I was quite prepared to see him disregard the command, but he did not do so. The troops halted immediately, and a few minutes afterwards Vasca himself joined us.

"A perilous journey, your Highness, but well accomplished," he said. "After a short halt shall we move forwards, and camp in the open? Our vanguard is now at the edge of the woods."

"The open country may bring us in sight of the enemy, Sir Vasca," she said.

"Your Highness will remember that it was not my wish to advance to-night. I, too, think it probable than the enemy are before us."

"They have been marching with us all night, Count," I said. "Their movements were so well timed with ours, that they must have been watching the camp."

"That is unlikely; still, if it is so, we are prepared to meet them, I trust."

He spoke so honestly that for a moment I almost doubted if he were the villain I believed him to be. It is strange how honestly a scoundrel is capable of speaking.

"Quite prepared," I answered. "True men have no fear even if numbers are against them."

I left him with Daria, Jasar keeping watch upon him, and joined Walen.

"Is the trap set for us, think you?" I asked.

"I do not know. We may have got out of it in time."

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“At last you believe in the trap, then?”

“I cannot understand such villainy,” he answered.
“Yet—”

“Yet you believe it exists?”

“Why, yes, Verrall. Unwillingly I am bound to admit that I believe it.”

“Pick me a dozen men,” I said. “I am going to ride forward, and see what is in store for us.”

With my little company, I went through the woods, keeping well away from the main body, but being careful not to go far enough to fall in with the enemy, who had kept pace with us through the night. A short ride brought us to the edge of the wood. Before us was open, undulating country, broken here and there by a patch of stunted trees and undergrowth. To the right and left the woods swept round in a semi-circle, and we saw that the woods on either side were not empty. In the grey dawn the enemy were taking up their position, ready to attack us as soon as we were in the open. It was impossible to tell what numbers were against us, but they were not likely to have undervalued our strength. The Count would take care of that for his own sake. He could not afford to lose now.

“This is to be our battle-ground, then,” I said.

“And the ground of our victory, Sir Verrall,” said a man beside me.

“Perhaps so. I hope so.”

Poor fellow! Later in the day I saw him cut down. Neither the shout of victory nor the curse of defeat mattered to him.

We went slowly and silently back. Life has an added charm when death stands near. The day had dawned, and, like myself, I doubt not that many of

my companions wondered if they would see the close of it. Was there any way of ensuring safety even for some of us? There was one way which held a prospect of success. I had thought of it before, but had put it aside as unpracticable and dangerous, yet now it seemed worthy of consideration. Why not make Count Vasca a prisoner? It could be done quickly and quietly if he were still with the Princess. Should he cry out, there were many ways of silencing him. It seemed to me that it would be a small crime to silence so great a scoundrel for ever. It was dangerous, and would bring matters to a head suddenly. The knights, who were villains only a little less black than himself, and the men he had seduced to treachery would probably at once attack us; but their leader would be gone, the very heart of their strength. Besides, Vasca had probably not made an absolute confidant of any one of his friends for his own safety, and without definite news from him, the enemy would be at a loss how to act.

Daria might not agree to this seeming piece of treachery, so I determined to make him a prisoner first, and explain to her afterwards.

I put spurs into my horse, but I was too late. Vasca had left.

“What new danger is in store for us, Sir Verrall? Your face shows your anxiety.”

“Not a new danger, your Highness. I have found out where the enemy is hidden.”

And I drew on the ground a rough plan of the circular woods.

“If we march straight forward we shall leave the woods here,” she said, indicating the point on my plan.

"Yes."

"Would it not be well to keep to the woods, and fall upon the enemy from the rear? The Count can lead the main body into the open to draw the enemy out."

She looked at me with a curious glance in her eyes. I thought I understood it.

"The Count has gone without having any instructions from your Highness."

"He can be sent for."

A messenger was despatched at once. Safety seemed to lie in Vasca's capture, and here was my opportunity. I drew Walen aside for a moment.

"He must not return," I said.

"Is that the Princess's order?"

"No. Make him a prisoner first, ask her permission afterwards. It is no time to be courteous."

"It may be a false move," he said doubtfully.

"Possibly, but it may be salvation," I answered. "Players for high stakes, Sir Walen, have to risk much."

But again my plan failed. The Count excused himself from coming. The enemy was moving in the open, he said, and he could not leave his command.

"Are our troops moving?" asked Daria.

"They were about to do so, your Highness," the messenger answered.

"Go to the Count and command him not to move until he has our instructions. A guard for us, gentlemen. Sir Walen, move the left wing slowly forward, but not out of the wood. Keep in touch with the main body." She mounted her horse lightly, Jasar holding her stirrup. "Sir Verrall, gentlemen, follow

us. We will fight this battle our way, not in Count Vasca's."

She would have inspired any man with courage. She put a better spirit into me.

"Have a care, dear one," I whispered, as I rode beside her.

"Have a ready sword to defend me if necessary," she answered.

We rode up to the Count even as the messenger was delivering his message.

"We sent for you, Count," she said severely.

"Pardon, your Highness, but I could not come."

"We sent for you," she repeated. "Have you yet to learn the virtue of obedience?"

"Your Highness, I——"

"Disobedience is the mark of a rebel, Count Vasca. Look to it, or we shall be in danger of misjudging you. Do you only now discover that the enemy are before us? You have a poor knowledge of this campaign, it seems. The main body will advance at once into the open. The woods sweep round to right and left in a semi-circle. The enemy are hidden there awaiting us. Your mission is to draw them from their hiding-place." Then, turning to a knight with us, she went on: "Go to the right wing and command them to advance through the woods and attack the enemy in the rear on that side. There are half-hearted warriors among us, Count; it is our duty to see that they do us no harm. We shall know how to deal with rebels. For Drussenland and for your Princess, forward!"

I half expected the Count to refuse, but he did not do so. Either he was uncertain of himself, or the

plans for success were so complete that the manner of attack was of little importance.

He gave a quick word of command, and as the troops moved, we rode back, and with the left wing commenced our way to attack the enemy on that side.

We saw the main body advance steadily and slowly into the open, a good sight to look upon, one to inspire confidence, had the men only been true.

There was a distant shout, and a flight of arrows fell among them.

"If a stray shaft should find a weak spot in Vasca's harness, all might be well yet," I said to Walen.

"He is not likely to run much risk," he answered.

"You are convinced now, then?"

"Yes, Verrall. It will go hard with us, I think; but, at least, we'll make history to-day. We shall have the enemy and the traitors before us, and we'll fight as we fought at the bridge. Traitors are mostly cowards, and they shall pay a dear reckoning."

Horsemen came from the woods on either side, and the battle in the open became general.

The Princess halted.

"Those men fight like friends," she said. "The treachery is not so deeply-rooted as you supposed, Sir Verrall."

"A few men's lives are nothing to those who conceived the treachery," said Jasar.

I nodded, endorsing the priest's statement, but I could not deny that there was fierce fighting going on before us. Our men were eager to join in the battle, but the time for action on our part was not yet.

"The greater the confusion yonder, the more safety for us," I said to Walen.

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"Our turn will come. We have only to wait," he answered.

With him I arranged what knights were to keep with the Princess.

"She will want you with her," he said.

"When the time comes I ride side by side with you," I answered.

"I am glad," he returned.

We had not long to wait. From the woods opposite, a large body of horsemen came slowly. I expected to see them charge into the thick of the fight; but, instead, they suddenly made a wide sweep and came towards us. Our archers sent one flight of arrows among them, and then we charged.

I might, perhaps, set down a long account of that day's work, as a man having a chance to tell a tale often will do, padding out the few facts he has knowledge of with much that is simply imagination. I might do this, and perchance make good reading, too, but I shall content myself with telling of what I actually saw, incidents, that is, that I took a part in. From the moment we charged I had enough to do with the business immediately at hand, but there was no sentiment about me now as once there had been, no fear of putting all my muscle into every stroke of my sword. I was persuaded that right was upon our side, and that gives a man strength and courage. Powerful as the enemy before us were, they could not withstand our charge. We cut into them, sweeping them back in confusion. The same spirit was in us all. No quarter was asked for nor given, and many a rider, friend and foe, lay with limbs outstretched, his day's work and his life's work over. We turned

and swept back again to the foot of the rising ground on which Daria stood with the company especially reserved to defend her. They greeted us with a cheer, and we shouted answer. It sounded like a cry of victory.

"They were driven back upon the main body, Sir Verrall. The face of the battle is changing."

Walen pointed with his sword. The fight which had begun fiercely was lessening. Our true enemies and our traitor friends were beginning to understand one another.

"We have shown them the men they have to reckon with," I answered.

Some show of fighting was still maintained in front of us, and our archers sent quick flights of arrows into the mass. They were all enemies there, though they would not have us think so yet. Then a mass of horsemen came towards us at a hand gallop.

"Does Vasca lead them?" I asked.

"I cannot see him," Walen answered. "You must live until later in the day to pay your debt to him."

"I shall live to do it," I answered, as we charged again.

I felt that I spoke the truth.

It was a fiercer struggle than the first. Twice I was nearly thrown from my saddle, once, for a few moments, losing all consciousness of my surroundings, and striking blindly about me as a man might do in a nightmare. It was fortunate for me that my horse kept his legs. It was Walen's voice that brought me back to consciousness.

"Not too far, Verrall. They are surrounding us."

Mechanically almost, I swung my horse round, and we began to fight our way back. Walen's warning

opened my eyes to the danger, and the press of the enemy, who had closed in behind us as we had fought our way through the mass in front, told me that they had out-manceuvred us. Even now we were too late. There was a triumphant shout as another body of horsemen went by our struggling mass, and rode straight for the rising ground. What could that little company do against such an overpowering enemy?

"For the Princess!" I shouted, rising in my stirrups, and swinging my sword with the renewed strength despair gave me. "Back to the Princess every one of us! We'll leave our bodies there, not here."

So, looking back at that awful day, one incident in it seems to close. I cannot tell what time elapsed before the next opened. Suddenly it seemed I was free, only Walen and a few comrades with me, and nothing between us and the battle raging round the rising ground.

"For the Princess!" some one shouted, and we dashed forward.

How gallantly they fought, that little company, and against what odds! At the best we could help them but little, for our ranks had been sadly thinned in those two charges, and although the spirit to do was in us, our muscles needed rest. Yet were we not to be despised, and well our enemies knew this. It was no small body of horsemen that turned to prevent us cutting our way to our comrades, but at least five to one.

"For the Princess!" we cried.

"For the King!" they shouted answer.

And from many it was a lying shout. This was only the beginning of their treason; they were bent

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on being as false to the King presently as they had already been to the Princess.

Side by side Walen and I went, inch by inch fighting our way towards the rising ground, encouraging each other, helping each other. How our companions fared I know not. Walen and I seemed to be alone in the midst of enemies. Still we went on step by step. There seemed no power strong enough to stop us. Now Walen would have been cut down had not my sword defended him and now his shield saved me. Without putting our knowledge into words, we knew that our only chance of winning through was to keep together. Many a determined effort was made to separate us, and many an honest foe met an honest death, and many a traitor paid his penalty. Success seemed certain, when suddenly I was alone. A rush of horsemen parted us, and I saw my comrade carried away from me, hard beset. Still the fight was not lost. I shouted to him, and he heard me. I saw the horsemen nearest to him go down as he turned, fighting his way back to me, and I pressed my horse forward to meet him. And we succeeded. We did meet, but at what a cost! Even as I shouted in triumph a sword flashed above him, and fell splitting through his armor near the neck.

“The Princess!” he cried once, loudly as in full health, and then he pitched forwards from his saddle and lay almost under my horse’s hoofs.

The man who struck the blow was athirst for double honors, but it is ever dangerous to face the comrade of a slain man. To avenge a friend is an instinct with the best of us. He struck, and then, in his turn, he pitched forwards, cut through, I think, by as stern a blow as that he had given a moment

before. My horse trampled over him, but in death the man won the honor he coveted, for the horse stumbled, and I came to the ground, falling across the bodies of my friend and my foe.

And so the second incident ended. The third opened immediately.

I was unhurt and sprang to my feet. A clear space was round me. Perchance these enemies of mine recognized in me a worthy foe, and were unwilling to use their great advantage to slay me; but there was one before me who would have no such scruple. With his sword in his hand, Count Vasca looked at me. He did not ride at me at once, but he smiled.

"The time has come, Sir Verrall," he said.

It was his smile, not his words, which maddened me.

"Ah, good foemen," I cried, "grant me but a little space to prove this man a coward and a liar, and on my oath I will throw down my sword, and you can work your will upon me."

They might have given me leave, for Vasca had not too many friends, but the Count gave them no time to answer. In a moment he was upon me, and his first blow split my harness at the shoulder. I know that the wound was deep, for afterwards it troubled me sorely, but then I hardly felt it. My whole ambition was to kill Vasca; that done, it mattered not what happened—even Daria was forgotten for the time. It was an unequal struggle. He was mounted and fresh, I on foot and weary. As he tried to ride me down, I caught the horse's bridle, and attempted to throw him back upon his haunches. The Count was too good a horseman to

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let me succeed in this however. He knew his advantage, and was not going to throw it away by having to meet me on foot. He could afford to wait his opportunity. How long a fight it seemed! although it could only have lasted a few minutes. As he played with me, I knew that my strength was failing. What could I do? What desperate effort could help me?

"The time is nearing its end," he laughed. "I told you that I always crushed my enemies."

He dealt me a blow which staggered me as he spoke. The time was nearing its end. What could I do?

He followed me up as I staggered back, prepared to strike again.

I made a feint, then dodged his blow, and sprang up at him, my foot upon his foot in the stirrup. My arms were round him. His horse plunged, and in an instant the Count and I were on the ground. Now we were both swordless and helmetless. My fingers gripped his throat.

"The time has come!" I hissed, as still gripping his throat with one hand, I struck his head twice, thrice, with all my strength with the other.

I should have killed him. My fingers would never have relaxed until they had gripped life out of him; but it was not to be. Men rushed in to separate us. I was dragged from my victim, and a few moments later was lying on my back, my arms bound to my side.

Thus the third episode ended. Only one more can I speak of.

The Count was not dead, but he was unconscious. They took him up, and a space was cleared for them.

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to carry him to some spot where he could be attended to. And it was through this space that I saw the last incident of that terrible day—the end of the fight. The rising ground was before me, and its gallant company of defenders lay still upon the sides of it. As I looked, the enemies' hands were laid upon the Princess, and only one friend was beside her—Jasar. Foes surrounded her, and dragged her from her horse. Seeing that all was lost, the priest might have considered that his life was still valuable to his mistress, that he might help her in her captivity. But the hands were laid roughly upon her, and that hurt him. His sword came down upon the nearest of her enemies, and for a minute he was dealing out death around him. They would not have killed a priest, possibly, but Jasar, save in raiment, was a priest no longer. As a warrior, there was no quarter for him, and I saw him fall dead at the feet of the woman he had loved and served so well.

It was the last thing I saw—the last episode of that day, for a blackness came between my eyes and the blue sky, and for me the day ended.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE TRAITOR O'RYAN

WHEN I recovered consciousness we were within sight of Yadasara. I was lying upon a rough litter, which four men carried, and I remained in a semi-wakeful state for some time before any one about me noticed that I was conscious. My bearers went carefully, and the swinging motion was not unpleasant. My arms were no longer bound, and the wound in my shoulder, which throbbed considerably, had been carefully bandaged up. It was full daylight, about midday I judged, and I wondered how long a time had elapsed since memory failed me.

I raised my head to look about me.

"You're better, then?" said a man, coming to the side of the litter.

"Yes. It's hot, and I'm thirsty. May a prisoner drink?"

"Why, yes. We've been doing our best to keep you alive since yesterday."

His voice sounded familiar, and I looked at him as he held his flask to my lips.

"Since yesterday! A day and a night passed?"

He nodded.

"You know me?"

"You were in my company when you were in the King's guard."

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"I remember. It is almost like being among friends."

"You'll hardly find it so yonder," and he waved his hand towards the city.

"I suppose not."

He gave some command to the men marching on either side of the litter.

"You have attained promotion, it seems."

"And have deserved it," he answered.

"Tell me, where is the Princess?"

"In front."

"Well—safe?"

"She is well, if having life is to be well; but safe——"

"I understand."

"She is well cared for; have no fear of that. You are both too precious to die for the want of a little attention."

"Could I speak to her?"

"No," he answered sharply.

"Not for the sake of old comradeship?"

"No, I cannot do it. I have no ill-will towards you. I admire a worthy foeman, and if I can do anything for you yourself, I will; but I cannot do what you ask with regard to the Princess."

I saw that it would be useless to try and persuade him. The man was inclined to be friendly within certain limits; it would be unwise to attempt to press him beyond them.

"And Count Vasca?" I asked, after a pause.

"Much as you are, getting better."

"That is bad news. I had hoped that that debt was paid."

"You did your best," he returned.

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“Though we be jailer and prisoner, we have something in common, at any rate,” I laughed.

“What is that?”

“We both regret that I did not succeed.”

The ghost of a smile flickered upon his face for a moment.

“I cannot listen to such things,” he said abruptly, and left me.

Although I knew that for me there was no hope of mercy within the city, I was glad to feel better. There was no regret that I had not died upon the battle-field. Whatever was in store for me, life yet was mine, and its possession was pleasant. While there is life there is hope, was indeed most true in my case. A dozen chances might yet happen in my favor. I had escaped from Yadasara once. Might I not do it again? Everything had seemed against me then, even as it did now, yet I had succeeded. The fact gave me some confidence. Besides, I had not only myself to think of. I might at least rescue Daria even if I could not escape myself. I hope it was not selfish of me to wonder if she would be satisfied with such an ending to all we had hoped to be to each other. Hoped to be! The thought of that future which I had dreamed of made me pause in my speculations. I turned my head to right and left. A wall of steel was on either side of me, and in front Yadasara with its fortress and its dungeons, its machinery for torture, and its way out which only dead men took.

We crossed the river by the bridge of boats, and it was evident that many of the citizens had come out to meet us, for there was much shouting of welcome. The shouting increased into a roar as the vanguard

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entered the city gates, doubtless at the sight of Daria chiefly. It was renewed again as I passed in, as loudly, I think, and the crowd pressed forward to look at me. At any rate, I had won fame.

My former comrade came to my side again.

"A conqueror could not command more interest than you," he said.

"That is poor consolation."

"I think I would be a great traitor rather than nothing," he answered.

"I am not even a great traitor," I said.

"I would not say so if I were you. It is easier to confess and have done with it."

"Possibly, but I am no hand at taking easy methods when they are against my conscience."

He bent over me, and made as if he were examining my wound.

"Better to die quickly than slowly in the fortress yonder," he whispered. "It is good advice I give when I say confess and have done with it. If I dared do it, I would plunge my dagger into you now, and I should be doing you a kindness."

"You think so, friend, but I had rather live. I have been in worse straits than this. I may live to be in worse again."

"You will, and then you may find death too long in coming."

"Death and I seem to be old friends; we have walked so long together," I answered.

"You are a brave man, but a fool!" he said.

We halted before the palace yard, and I was helped from my litter. I should have fallen had not strong arms held me up. I was weaker than I thought, and was angry that those about me should see it. As it

chanced, my weakness was in my favor. With help I walked across the palace yard between ranks of warriors, and then was face to face with the King.

"So you come again to Yadasara," he said, a smile upon his lips.

I did not answer. My eyes were fixed on Daria, who stood a few yards from me guarded by soldiers.

He noticed my look.

"And you bring a welcome companion this time. We thank you. You made many enemies by your escape, but it has served us better than if you had failed. There's little strength in you now. We must see that that is restored a little before we punish you for your treachery. It would be a poor recompense to see such a man die like a woman."

"Your Highness shall not see that," I said.

"We have heard many a strong man boast as much," he answered. "We have good arguments against the boast. To the fortress with him; but treat him gently. He shall have a chance of proving his boast. You, madam, too, are weak, for all you stand so bravely. You shall have rest and gentle treatment for a while. Then we shall find means to pay you for the lives of our subjects which your rebellion has caused. To the fortress with them both. And you citizens and warriors make holiday. Peace is restored in the land. The enemies of your King have fallen, and await punishment."

The shouts greeting his words echoed in the square as I was led away. Daria was not allowed to come near me, and I lost sight of her.

I was placed in the litter again, and carried up to the fortress. They were very gentle with me, and knowing what was in store for me, some of them

may have pitied me. I took no notice of them—I asked no questions as we ascended. My eyes were fixed upon the battlements which crowned the great rock. Should I ever see them again? Would my eyes ever again behold the sun brightening the good earth? And I thought of Mustapha, and Brâyle, and home; and then, as we passed under the gloomy portal, hope went out even as the sun went out. I have had some dark moments in my life, but I think this was the darkest. And yet, perhaps, there was a darker moment almost immediately afterwards, for surely there can be nothing worse than the desertion of a friend. The guard of the fortress received us, and with a considerably amount of formality I was handed over to my new jailers. I hardly noticed them, for my eyes were fixed upon a figure sitting in a porch within the gateway. The man sat limply, looked as though he were in pain, and I saw that his arm was in a rough sling. Hope was not dead. I had a friend in the fortress.

“O’Ryan!” I cried, a tone of joy in my voice doubtless. I was careless of what my jailers might think.

He looked at me, but did not move. There was an exasperating chuckle at my ear, and I turned to face the Spaniard, Costa.

He was fatter and greasier than ever, and he was tricked out in bright armor.

“You’ll find that friendship dead,” he said.

I glanced again at O’Ryan. He had risen from his seat, and looked so different from what I had known him, that I concluded that the wound I had given him in that desperate fight upon the stairs must have been deeper than I had thought.

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"Was he much hurt?" I asked Costa.

"Enough to kill his friendship. I have commands to treat you gently. You may speak to him if you will."

"O'Ryan, have you no word for an old comrade?" I said.

"None for a false one and a traitor," he answered fiercely, and he turned and limped through the door of the porch.

Yes, I think that was the hardest moment I have known.

"There always comes a reckoning to men with such luck as you have," said Costa. "March! There is another interesting little company climbing the road."

I looked round quickly, and saw that it was Daria, guarded as I was. It occurred to me to ask Costa to let me have speech with her, but on second thoughts I decided not to do so. He was not the man to trust with even half a secret. So I went on without a word.

"I will come and make you comfortable presently, when I have attended to your Princess," Costa said. "Truly this fortress is honored now."

He laughed as the heavy door closed upon me, and I was left alone in the gloom which struggled through a narrow slit in the masonry high above my head.

Presently he returned, followed by two men carrying rugs, with which they proceeded to make me a not uncomfortable bed in one corner. Costa sat down on a stool, and remained silent until he dismissed them.

"You have a good couch," he said, directly we were

alone. "You will have good food and drink; you are well lodged."

"As an animal fattening for a fair," I answered.

He laughed.

"That is a good description."

"My position amuses you?"

"Not yours so much as the woman's."

"Do you mean the Princess?"

"Call her so if you will," he answered.

An angry retort rose to my lips, but I remained silent. Why quarrel with a man who seemed disposed to be friendly, and who might help me?

"Carrying herself like a queen—in armor, too. Nothing of the miserable prisoner about her. Ah, it amuses me greatly."

He unconsciously let me know that Daria had borne the degradation she had been subjected to bravely, and I was glad.

"Is she lodged in the fortress?" I asked, as unconcernedly as possible.

"Yes, my friend. As chief of the fortress, I have the honor to entertain you both. She is now clothed as a woman, and as a woman—— Ah! she is better, much better. She has beauty enough to make fools of some men."

"Take care you are not one of them," I said.

"You are too good a warning," he answered. "See what the love of a woman has brought you to."

"Love!" I laughed. "Is that crime laid to my charge, too?"

"Love is no crime."

"It seemed to me you thought so."

"Ah, no. It is a crime only when it runs contrary to your own welfare. Do you say you are not

in love with this woman who calls herself a Princess? Count Vasca spoke differently."

"Am I to be judged by what Count Vasca says of me?"

"There are other matters, many other matters, that I need not tell you of."

"And the punishment?"

"In good time. It will come."

"When I am strong enough to bear it?"

He nodded.

"The machinery and torture, then death and an exit from Yadasara that way." I pointed to the corner of the cell where the locked flagstone was.

"Yes," he said, rising; "but it may be easier than you think—it depends."

"Upon what?"

"The executioners."

"And the Princess?" I asked, after a pause.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It is always difficult to prophesy the fate of a beautiful woman," he answered. "But for you, my friend, let me advise: make friends with the executioners."

CHAPTER XXXI

CONDEMNED TO DEATH

EXCEPT that for many hours a day I sat in a gloomy twilight, I was well treated. I was well fed, and was allowed to walk for a certain time each day upon the ramparts—well guarded, of course. It did occur to me more than once if it would not be better to make a dash past my jailers and throw myself over, than to stay and suffer the torture for which I was predestined; but life yet seemed too whole within me to be thus thrown away.

I had hoped to catch a glimpse of Daria during my daily constitutional; but the hope was not fulfilled. I think it is possible that Costa might have so arranged matters as to grant me this request had I asked him, but I dared not do so. Her beauty might save her. My love might condemn her. So I led Costa to believe that she was no more to me than any other woman. It cost me much to say it, and, perhaps, with all my careful acting he did not altogether believe me. What wonder? The man who could be indifferent to such a woman as Daria, must indeed have some crookedness in him.

In my lonely hours I was not idle. I examined my cell, its floor and its walls, and the locked trap in the corner. The walls and the floor were hopeless. Such solid masonry would yield but slowly to a

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company of men with all appliances to hand. But the trap attracted me. It was a way out I knew, even if it were only dead men who took it. I wonder how often and how long I have stood gazing at the trap, fascinated by the thoughts it gave rise to.

I lost count of time. Days and nights passed, and I knew that I had been a prisoner for a long while. An imaginative man might have hoped that he had been forgotten. I knew my enemies too well to think so, and Costa was constantly advising me regarding the future. He seemed to enjoy sitting in my cell, and if his conversation was not of the most consoling kind, it helped to pass some weary hours. I have never been able to make up my mind what the Spaniard's true feelings towards me were, whether he had some sort of respect for me, or whether it delighted him to speak of the gruesome tortures which were in store for me. At different times I leaned towards both opinions, now almost convinced that had he dared he would willingly have given me an opportunity to escape, and now equally convinced that he would gladly have introduced me forthwith to the infernal machinery over which he was master.

He came one evening late—later than was his wont, and with him came O'Ryan. I was lying on my couch, and did not rise as they entered. My quondam friend had evidently recovered, for he walked vigorously, and his arm looked capable of wielding a good sword again.

"It is to-morrow," said Costa, fixing the torch in the ring in the wall.

"What is to-morrow?"

"Your trial. We are just in Yadasara. We give a man a trial—generally."

There was a certain grim humor in that pause before the last word. It made me ask him why I was to be honored with a trial.

"I cannot tell. It seems to me a useless waste of time. It comes to the same thing in the end."

I thought this quite probable.

"Shall I be allowed to speak?" I asked.

"Oh, yes; but it would be well to have a care what you say, eh, captain?"

Thus directly appealed to, O'Ryan, who had stood silently with folded arms, burst out laughing.

"I might say too much to please that rascally companion of yours, is that it?" I asked Costa, nodding contemptuously towards O'Ryan.

"Rascal!" exclaimed the Irishman excitedly.

"Steady." Costa interposed. "You will doubtless have the pleasure of witnessing your enemy's discomfiture, but it is not for you to administer the punishment."

O'Ryan turned away without a word. He forgot to growl out an oath. He was changed. He was not the same O'Ryan I had known and trusted in.

The city turned out to see me on the morrow, when I was taken from the fortress to the palace. My arms were bound securely behind me, the memory of my escape from the city making them cautious.

"A foolish ceremony. A waste of time," I heard Costa remark to some of his companions more than once.

I was marched into the great hall of the palace, and, soldiers on either side of me, was placed before the King. He was seated at the upper end, surrounded by his Court, and was talking and laughing with those about him. A callous assembly it was to

try a man for his life! At a little distance from me stood Daria, very pale and very beautiful. Had my courage faltered for a moment, the sight of her, firm, resolute, and fearless, would have filled me with new strength. To her I bowed, to the King I made no obeisance. Near the King sat Count Vasca, and next to the Count, Lady Aldrida. The Count was pale—perhaps by reason of his recent wounds; Lady Aldrida looked as if the proceedings thoroughly amused her. Now she was the woman who had once tempted me successfully to make love to her—not the woman who had attempted to strike me dead in the dark court in the city that night. I noticed that she moved her dress to fall more gracefully as I looked at her, and I thought how poor a sport it must be to try to fascinate a man in my position. Great Heaven! How difficult some Christian laws are to obey! How could I help hating this woman and this man?

Then the smiles went from the King's face, and those around him were silent.

"Madam," he said, turning to Daria, "there is little need for us to tell you of what you are accused. In Drussenland there cannot be two rulers. It has pleased you to set yourself up against your rightful King, and with the help of traitors to their King and their country to defy us, for this long season bringing war where peace should be. At your door lie in heaps the men who have fallen in defence of their country, and their blood cries to us to be avenged. Are there any words that can say aught in your defence? If so, speak them. We are just—nay, even merciful. We bear no secret malice; rather do we look with reverence on a woman who has defied

our power so long. In the hearing of this Court, speak in your own defence, if you have aught to say. This Court shall judge you, not we, and truly your fair face should find many a one to deal out lenient judgment."

The King stopped as suddenly as he had begun to speak. I had expected a much more malicious accusation.

There was a pause. I saw Count Vasca lean forward and look fixedly at the Princess. I wondered if it were on his account that the King had spoken so gently.

"I am no traitor."

The words came firm and clear, no suspicion of trembling in her voice. She was as much a queen now as when I had first seen her, surrounded by her knights.

"No traitor, madam!"

Had I been close to her I should have bid her humor the King. His frown deepened in a moment at her words. Those around him understood the change in his manner. I could see it in their faces. It made no impression upon Daria.

"I stand here Princess of Drussenland," she said. "The fortune of war places me here standing, while the real traitor remains seated in my presence. You, who call yourself the King, are no King, nor are you established here in Yadasara by the will of true Drussenlanders. You are King only by the help of these paid foreigners, whose very names and country are unknown to you. For the judgment of your Court I care nothing. The true men of Drussenland, those whose judgment I could bow to, lie vultures' food in the open country beyond the walls of Yada-

sara. Here are only foreigners and traitors, who are nothing to me."

"We shall find means to subdue that bold spirit within you, madam," said the King.

"To kill it, not to subdue it," she answered.

"So have many spoken. Words come easily."

"And with a woman, action too."

"Bravely spoken. How say you, gentlemen? Is she not an example to many a man?"

Those about him laughed, as men will at the words of him they stand in awe of.

"You shall have opportunity to prove that boast," he went on, turning to Daria. "But let us argue a little, madam. In your accusations be just. We are not all foreigners. Am I not a Drussenlander?"

"One I should have delighted to honor had you been true to your country and your sovereign," was the answer.

I expected to see the King become savage; but he astonished me by laughing heartily. There was something of our own Charles the Second about this monarch. If an answer were ready enough, he could appreciate it, even if it were against himself.

"See what we have lost. By being a king we forego the happiness of being honored by a queen. What will you say then, madam, of Count Vasca? Surely he is a true Drussenlander, since he is your kinsman?"

"I have no words for Count Vasca," Daria said slowly.

"Not for your kinsman?"

The Count moved uneasily. I do not think the King was ill-pleased at his discomfiture.

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"Come, madam, have you no words for the Count?"

"There are no words fitting. You and your assumption of majesty I can understand. You have fought me face to face, a determined struggle in which you have won. It was treachery, indeed, but it was treachery open to the sun. If treachery can be honest, yours was. But for the man who hides his treachery behind a smile, who works in secret to destroy those he professes to honor; for the false friend, the coward who dare not be an open enemy, there are no words. Gather all the scoundrels there are in Drussenland together, take from each one the meanest trait he has, and of these traits build you up a man. Even then shall you have a man I would rather claim kindred with than with Count Vasca."

"It seems you are a dangerous friend," said the King, turning to him.

"Your Majesty has not found me so."

"True. You see, madam, it is well sometimes to use similar weapons to those used by an adversary. If our enemy sends a spy, we, too, must do the same, or our ignorance may lose us the day. Count Vasca has received harsh language from your lips. What have you to say to your knight there? True, he was faithful to you, but be just. He is a spy. By a lie he entered Yadasara. He betrayed his friend, one Captain O'Ryan, who is with us to bear witness against him—more, he attempted to kill him. What harsh words have you for that man there?"

The King's finger, pointed at me, caused all eyes to turn towards me, Daria's also.

"Gather the best in Drussenland," she said slowly.

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“Take what is bravest, truest from them all, and make me a man. A great Drussenlander indeed would he be, yet head and shoulders over him would rise Sir Verrall—Clinton Verrall—my Knight of the Silver Star.”

No one can know so much of a man as that man knows about himself. If a man is honest he must perforce blush at praise, since he knows himself unworthy. Although I trust I have not made too much of what good there was in me, I have endeavored not to write with mock modesty, believing that he who exalts himself is as foolish as he who makes too little of himself. Whether a blush showed in my cheeks at Daria’s words, I cannot tell, but I know my heart beat faster with pleasure, and, in spite of my position, there was a keen delight in being so spoken of before my enemies, to say nothing of the sweet knowledge of Daria’s love which the words gave me.

For some moments there was silence, and no voice was raised to sneer at the character which had been given me. The same parable, if I may so call it, had been used to describe the Count and myself, and it had carried weight with it to my benefit and to Vasca’s undoing.

“You have a powerful advocate, Sir Knight,” said the King presently, “but there is another side to the question which condemns you deeply.”

“I am not worthy either of such high praise, your Majesty, or such deep condemnation.”

“You are modest as well as valiant, it would seem.”

“I lay claim to being an honest gentleman. The world holds no higher distinction.”

“Do honest men lie?” he asked severely.

"No."

"You did, else had you not entered Yadasara the first time."

"Pardon, your Highness, it was Captain O'Ryan who gave certain accounts of me, which satisfied you. In truth, my coming to the city was in the nature of a flight from my enemies."

I was not disposed to spare O'Ryan; why should I be?

"A valiant knight does not flee from his enemies," said the King.

"I fled from a would-be assassin—Count Vasca."

"Truly, Count, you have grievous charges laid against you."

"Who would believe the word of a spy?" said the Count savagely.

"That is well spoken, Sir Knight. A spy—what say you to that?"

"Even what your Majesty said just now. It is wise to handle similar weapons to those used by an enemy. In the Princess's camp there was not one spy, but a hundred. Ever since I came to Drussenland, Count Vasca and his friends have been working to betray the Princess. She had not been here now to hear your judgment, had not that scoundrel turned against her in the day of battle, sealing a long season of treachery by a crime that any man must revolt at, that your Majesty must hate."

"You are here to defend yourself, Sir Knight, not to accuse our friends."

"I have no defence," I answered. "I have fought for the Princess I serve. I have done what a man can do, and my conscience acquits me. But I have a word for your Majesty, if you will give me leave."

"Are words from such a man worth your Majesty's attention?" said Vasca. "When this man came to Drussenland, he used a foolish legend to account for his coming, gaining the ear of the priests, and such knights as studied vain romances rather than the art of arms. He made great promises. He spoke boastfully that he would place the Princess on the throne in Yadasara, that he would find the treasure which, it is said, is hidden in this land. This man has accused me of treachery, but my deepest sin has been in not being so foolish as those around me, and in throwing in my lot with wiser men rather than be carried away by the boastful promises of a deceiver."

"That is not all your sin, Count Vasca," I said. "Your Majesty has accepted the friendship of a man who, while he fawns upon you, is plotting your ruin."

The Count laughed contemptuously.

"The proof," said the King, rising from his chair.

"Captain O'Ryan can give it you."

"The Count spoke wisely when he said that your words were not worth our attention. We have heard that story from Captain O'Ryan's lips. The Captain has confessed that he was in error. His zeal for our safety, and some personal dislike to the Count, fostered by yourself, Sir Knight, made him hasty in his judgment. Their hands have met in confession and forgiveness. Is this all you have to say?"

"One man's word against another's is poor security for truth," I answered. "I would that I could prove the truth of my words at the sword's point with the Count, with O'Ryan, or any other man who doubts me."

"It would be well to stop this fellow's lying tongue quickly," said the Count.

"You and your accomplice, Lady Aldrida, have attempted to prevent it speaking the truth twice. You laugh at legends now. Would you have so laughed had her Highness smiled upon you, if she would have satisfied your ambition by marrying you?"

"Enough, enough!" cried the King. "Take him back to the fortress. At our pleasure he shall take back his lies, and perchance tell some secret of this treasure. There are hard questioners in the fortress, as you will find."

"They must be hard indeed to wring from me one good word for the villain beside your Majesty."

"They have drawn out a confession of love for a man's worst enemy before now," said the King.

"Death puts an end to all questions," I answered. "In my country men fear not death if met in an honest cause. We have taught the world what heroism is, singly and banded together. Please Heaven, I'll not disgrace my brothers nor the land that gave me birth. I claim no pity, I cry for no mercy; yet I would ask one favor of your Majesty."

The King had apparently not listened to my words, but he looked at me quickly now.

"What favor?"

"Let me pay the penalty for myself and for this lady."

Daria made one step towards the King.

"I pray you not to listen to the knight."

"Truly, madam, his own sins are heavy enough to answer for. It seems, Count, that your rival as well as your accuser stands before us."

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“Not my rival, your Majesty,” and Vasca laid his hand on Aldrida’s arm.

“We have no favors to grant,” said the King. “Take them both to the fortress. We will appoint a day for the questioning. They shall both die. So valiant a knight and so fair a lady are too dangerous to live in Drussenland.”

Daria made an effort to come to me, but the soldiers stopped her, and she was led from the hall. I heard Lady Aldrida laugh a merry, musical peal as I was taken away. I almost wished that I had killed her that night in the city.

CHAPTER XXXII

I MAKE FRIENDS WITH THE EXECUTIONERS

A MAN could hardly be in more desperate condition than I was. Except for Daria, who was powerless, I had no friend. I was to die; how soon I did not know. I was to be tortured; and since the King had such fiends as Vasca and Lady Aldrida beside him, there was no knowing what horrors they might not persuade him to perpetrate upon me. Yet, strange to say, I was not utterly cast down. It was not that I expected some miracle to happen, some way of escape to be opened for me, but rather, I think, that strength was given me to bear the trial.

Costa heaved a fat, heavy sigh of relief when he got me back into my dungeon. He was the only semblance of a friend I had got, and I shall always retain a kindly feeling for him, though I fear he did not live long to enjoy his proud position of keeper of the fortress.

"I said it was all waste of time," he remarked, in a callous manner. "And you didn't take my advice. You spoke too much."

"I rejoice that I had the chance."

"With more care you might have made things easier for yourself. His Majesty was in a good mood to-day."

"It would have been the same in the end."

"Perhaps—yes."

"Besides, I am not afraid of death."

He shook his head wisely.

"You do not know what it is here."

"Nor elsewhere, my friend," I answered. "Death is an experience one can only have once."

He sat thoughtfully for a few moments.

"About these executioners?"

"Well?"

"You must make friends with them."

"How? I have nothing to give in exchange for their courtesy."

"One doesn't do much for nothing in this country, as a rule," he laughed. "nor in any other country, for that matter; but we have a certain admiration for a brave man. It might be managed. I will see. I like you, and that is a good deal for me to admit. I have felt few thrills of pain or enjoyment for any one but myself. We must make friends with these executioners."

His friendliness encouraged me.

"Would you grant me a favor?" I asked.

He was on his guard in a moment.

"It is not easy to grant favors in my position."

"This is not a large one. Tell me; am I still allowed a daily constitutional on the ramparts?"

"Oh, yes; you will be treated well until your last day dawns."

"And the Princess, too?"

"Yes; and the other prisoner, too."

"Could you not so arrange it that we might meet upon the ramparts?"

"Impossible."

"Think, Costa, she is a woman. A kind word of encouragement would mean so much to her."

"Trust me, I will speak the kind word."

"She and I are friends in affliction; it would mean more to her if I spoke it."

"I do not doubt that," he said, with a chuckle. "You attempted to deceive me when you said you did not love her."

"I reverence her."

"It's the same thing. I am sorry, but I cannot do it."

"Grant me this favor, and I will ask no friendship from the executioners."

"Yet you say you do not love her?"

"Have I actually said that? Come, Costa, grant me this favor, and you may demand of me anything it is in my power to give. We are both soldiers of fortune—on different sides, it is true—yet, in a manner, comrades. You shall stand by me while I speak to her. In a few days I shall be lying leaden-footed in the river below us. It will be good to remember that you did a comrade a service."

"I like you, Verrall, but I love myself better. I cannot do it. I will see what I can do with the executioners."

He effectually stopped any further entreaty by leaving me. It seemed a small thing to ask, but I suppose he saw danger in granting it.

Had I had only myself to think of, I believe I should have made a dash for liberty during one of my daily constitutionals, and thrown myself from the ramparts. It would have meant certain death had I accomplished this escape, but that would be better than the lingering agony which awaited me. I had Daria to think of. What good was an easy death for me if she were left to suffer? True, I could not help

her, not even by a word, but I was near her. She knew that, and dividing walls cannot shut out sympathy and encouragement. The smallest child knows this. The mother in the next room is companionship enough, and the child sleeps well.

In these days, indeed, it would have been difficult to accomplish such an escape. I was a show prisoner. At the time of my constitutional, a small crowd collected upon the ramparts to watch me as I walked to and fro. It was not altogether a pleasant experience to know that I was being examined day by day, much as a prize animal is, that my points were freely discussed, and that speculation was rife how I should bear myself when the day of slaughter came. Still, there was a grim sort of encouragement in the interest the populace showed in me. The hardest time to be courageous is when one is alone. Even a solitary spectator helps a man, and virtually I had the eyes of the whole city upon me. There was, however, a very unpleasant side to being a show prisoner. At different times my cell was visited by the aristocracy of the city, even women and children coming to look upon the man who had once escaped from Yadasara, and was so mighty a warrior.

My fame had outstripped all reason. Often I listened to the stories told of me as a child does to a wonderful fairy-tale; they were all so unreal, so strange and new. Had I done a tithe of the marvels placed to my credit, I should have been a warrior indeed. During these visits I was always manacled, and this, I imagine, added to my charm. The most inoffensive man fettered, looks capable of being ferocious if he were only free. I remember a child who came one day, a dark-haired little girl with

thoughtful eyes. She stood before me, looking at me intently. Presently I smiled at her, to her great delight, for she turned to her mother, or whoever the woman was with her, and remarked—

“I don’t believe he would hurt me.”

Poor little woman, I should think not. Evidently I was the fashionable bogey to frighten naughty children with.

Had this show in my dungeon been for an hour or so, as that upon the ramparts, I might have found some amusement in it, but I was never certain when Costa might enter to tie me up, and the place be crowded with curious men and women who gave me a very wide berth until they were perfectly certain that I had been made secure. Costa, I think, found this invasion of the fortress as irksome as I did, for he answered any questions put to him with a very bad grace. O’Ryan constantly came with Costa, never alone. The Spaniard was afraid that his lieutenant might do me an injury. O’Ryan never spoke to me, and over and over again Costa riled at him for not making my last days as pleasant as possible.

“Surely it is revenge enough to see a former comrade in such a bad case?” he urged.

But the Irishman was obdurate. I wondered that he could have changed so completely.

One evening Costa came, accompanied by four men—as villainous-looking a crew, surely, as could be imagined. The last one seemed the most villainous until I looked at the first again. Each in his turn seemed worse than his companions. They entered stealthily, as though they were on a secret mission, and I rose from my seat, while a strange thrill traveled up my spine. I thought my time had come.

"I could not bring them before," said Costa. "You have been holding so many receptions."

I was relieved.

"The executioners," I said, trying to appear as if their coming had not disconcerted me. "Gentlemen, I regret that the poorness of my dwelling does not allow me to offer you much hospitality, nor much comfort, I fear. Perhaps we may have some wine."

"I ordered it as we came," said Costa.

Two of my guests lounged against the wall, and two sat upon the edge of the table. O'Ryan brought the wine, and retired into a corner. I could not see the expression of his face as Costa talked on my behalf.

"There are some men it is a pleasure to help slowly out of life," the Spaniard went on with diabolical carelessness. "The cries of a coward and a craven are good music, but there are others who, having faced death bravely every day, should not be allowed to die slowly even at the hands of their enemies. They have been real men all their lives, with a hand always ready to help a worthy friend or foe, and it is for worthy men to help them when the time comes. We all know that Sir Verrall is a man."

They nodded, and drank their wine in silence.

I thought it was time to speak for myself.

"We are all men here," I said. I looked towards O'Ryan's corner, and hoped he understood that I excepted him. "Had we met outside these walls, we should have fought each other to the death. Whether I fell or my enemy, fortune would decide, but whichever it was, it would have been an honorable fall. I do not fear even such a death as you administer within these walls, but I should like to cheat those false

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friends of mine who would gloat over my lingering agonies."

"And one of them is a woman, eh?" said one man, who appeared to be the chief.

"Yes."

"A man should never suffer for the sake of a woman," he returned, and his companions nodded approval of the sentiment.

"Then, my friends, are you willing to help me?"

"Stand up," said the spokesman. "Let me look at you."

I did as I was requested. He was a master in his infernal art, and he passed his hands over my arms, and back, and thighs. His touch was loathsome, not in itself exactly, but by inference. The others gathered round him to watch the operation.

"There are muscles here that will take some cracking," he said thoughtfully.

"An unlucky blow on the head might ease that difficulty," I suggested.

"Aye; and stretch our limbs instead of yours," he laughed. "My willingness to help you does not extend to that."

"A quick jerk should suffice," said Costa.

"Feel that muscle, captain," was the answer.

Costa put his hand under my shoulder and whistled.

"It is harder than the King's" said the executioner.

"I know that," Costa answered, remembering my trial of strength with his Majesty; "but that sweet machine of yours should be equal to it."

"You think it has had practice enough, eh, captain?"

"I warrant it can be turned to crack even the

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knight's muscles, mighty as they are," said one of the others. "It can be gentle and powerful too. Do you remember when it embraced a man and a woman on the same day?"

"That experiment is likely to be repeated," said the chief executioner.

"The Princess!" I exclaimed.

"They say so."

"Why trouble Sir Verrall with that?" said Costa, evidently angry that I had been told.

"It is of little consequence," answered the man, with a rough laugh. "In death a man can only take care of himself. I will treat the lady quickly too, if the knight wills it."

With an effort I was calm.

"That is indeed being a comrade," I said, holding out my hand. "I have a weakness in my nature—a foolish one, perhaps, but I don't like women to suffer."

"It requires strength to suffer much. Women don't suffer as men do," he returned, with brutal certainty. "And if they do, what matter?—they are only women."

I dared not express my horror.

"But in this case you will bring death quickly?" I said.

"You may rely on us."

"That is satisfactory," said Costa, rising.

I had almost forgotten O'Ryan. I remembered him then.

"That man has heard our bargain," I said.

"He will not betray it."

"Do you swear not to do so?" I said, turning to the Irishman.

"I am not less merciful than the executioners," he growled.

I shook each villain by the hand as he left me, and asked Costa to distribute amongst them what few possessions I had. I shook hands even with O'Ryan, and then I was left alone.

Did O'Ryan grasp my hand more firmly than was necessary? I might have spent the night wondering, but when they had gone, I broke down, for the first time during my imprisonment. I shed tears of impotent rage, pacing my cell frantically, cursing and beating its stone walls like a madman. It was horrible to know that Daria would be laid on that hideous couch to have her fair limbs broken, that her death, heroic though it might be, as I believed it would be, should be witnessed by such loathsome wretches as the men who had just left me, and, perhaps, only by them. What could I do? Nothing. I was powerless to help her but with a prayer, and, Heaven forgive me! prayer seemed impossible just then. I was mad for a time. I broke my nails tearing at the stones which shut me in, and only when I was thoroughly exhausted did I throw myself on my rugs and fall asleep, to dream—what mockery it was!—of pleasant fields and sunshine. Why are such dreams sent to men in so miserable a condition as I was?

I awoke refreshed. Perhaps the very dreams I have railed at gave my sleep its power to refresh me. My first thought was of Daria, my second of O'Ryan. Had he pressed my hand last night with some meaning? Surely it was impossible, seeing how he had helped to ruin me; but a man in dire necessity sees hope in anything.

It was not until the afternoon that I had any vis-

itors that day. I had begun to hope that I was going to be left alone altogether, when Costa came in and bound me as usual.

"More fools with too much leisure," I said wearily.

"An old friend this time," said a merry voice in answer, and Lady Aldrida entered, followed by two or three men. It was easy to see that they were her captives as surely as I was a prisoner in the fortress.

"This was an old lover of mine, gentlemen," she said gaily. "He was foolish enough not to value my friendship. Behold the result."

"Who does not value your friendship deserves no better fate," said one.

She laughed. There was something haunting in her laugh. She was a pretty picture; much as I hated her, I could not deny that. She had evidently ridden to the fortress, for she carried her whip in her hand.

"Do all men who displease you come to this?" asked another of her cavaliers.

"I am not so unmerciful. Sir Verrall and I are old friends, or enemies—which is it?" and she turned to me.

"Enemies," I answered shortly.

"True, and you are in my power."

"That does not trouble me."

"But it will," she answered.

I laughed. She should not imagine that my spirit was broken.

"You have yet to learn the terrors this fortress holds. You shall have one spectator, I warrant you, when a slow turn of the lever draws that body of yours into agony. For all your boasting, these walls, solid though they be, will hardly drown your cries,

and if you have sense left to hear anything, you shall hear my laugh.

"I shall be glad of a spectator," I answered. "It gives a man courage."

"You shall not profit by my coming. I will pour all I possess into the hands of the executioner if he but kills you slowly enough."

I could laugh at this threat since the executioners were my friends.

"I vowed once to be revenged," she went on savagely. "I shall be amply satisfied. You and your Princess will make fine sport for me."

"The day will come, madam, when you will make good sport for others, perhaps," I answered. "You are fair, but that will not save you when the King discovers that I spoke the truth, that your friendship—yours and the villain who now professes to love you—is found to be a mask."

"You lie!"

"Count Vasca would be King in Yadasara; yet, with all your beauty, he would not make you Queen but for the fact that he might be afraid to make an enemy of an accomplice."

"Is it not time we were going, Lady Aldrida? Our horses will be getting restive," said one of her companions. "Besides, the man is a prisoner. Why not leave him in peace?"

"You can go if you will. I have no need of you," she said angrily.

He bowed low to her, and left the dungeon.

"Your friends are even now finding you out," I sneered.

She changed her tone.

"You make me angry, Sir Verrall. I came on an

errand of mercy. It may not yet be too late. I have the ear of the King. Why not ask me to plead to him for you?"

"I have never yet asked quarter from an enemy."

"Remember the agony when these limbs of yours are stretched beyond endurance."

And she touched me with her riding-whip.

"They will serve me as long as I require them."

"For Princess Daria, then. Will you not plead for her?"

"Not to you."

"Her limbs, like mine, are young, perhaps beautiful. Being slowly broken upon a rack is sad use to put them to."

"It is possible that Count Vasca has already pleaded for her," I answered. "If she would marry him, he would use his best endeavors, I warrant you. He is so faithful a friend, that he is capable of pleading for her life and for your death."

"I see I cannot help you. You persist in making me angry, and angry I am dangerous."

"Woman, you are always dangerous to those who trust you," I said hotly. "Beware, gentlemen, a viper is a pet not to be caressed lightly. I know this woman."

"Not yet. You have much to learn, and but a short time to learn it in. You will not plead for your Princess, and you are wise, perhaps, for I hate her as I hate you. In a few hours you shall have your desire—you shall embrace her, but you shall have no tongue to tell her of your love. You shall lie together in the waters underneath this fortress to rot, and I shall laugh every time I think of you. You

know me! I tell you, you have much to learn. It is time I began to teach you, like this and that."

She laid her riding-whip sharply across my face twice as she spoke. My arms were bound behind me. I could do nothing to protect myself.

"You devil!" I howled, springing to my feet.

One of the men with her remonstrated, the other laughed, even as she laughed. I forgot that she was a woman. The blows and the laughter aroused all that was brutal in my nature, all the madness in me, and for a moment gave me almost superhuman strength. Whether I was bound more loosely than usual, or whether the cords were slighter, I do not know, but with a mighty wrench I snapped them, and was free.

Costa had heard my howl, and entered the dungeon as I broke my bonds. I rushed at the she-devil who had struck me, and it had gone hard with her had not the companion who the moment before had remonstrated with her thrown himself between us. I struck at the woman, and the man received the blow, staggering back across the dungeon to the opposite wall. I heard the woman cry out in terror, but before I could strike again, Costa and the guard had seized me. They could hardly hold me; still, I am glad they succeeded, for I should have killed her had I been able to reach her.

"For Heaven's sake, go!" cried Costa.

The woman needed no second bidding. She fled from the dungeon, her face as white as that of a corpse. She did not laugh now. This time it was I who laughed—laughed like a madman.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A FRIEND INDEED.

NOT until the dungeon door was shut did Costa and his men release me.

"I almost wish we had come a moment too late," Costa said.

"I should have killed her!" I hissed.

"I believe you would."

"I was a fool not to do it the night she attempted to plunge a dagger into me."

"You were," he answered.

He evidently had no doubt what he himself would have done under similar circumstances.

Fortunately the blows had missed my eyes, on one side by less than a quarter of an inch. Had she struck a little higher, I had not lived to write this history. I should have perished miserably on the rack. For before me I had work which required keen sight, although I did not know it just then. As it was, the blows had struck deep, laying one cheek open to the bone. I carry the mark to this day, an angry flame across my face. I am never likely to forget the woman who put it there. Under Costa's care, however, the wounds healed rapidly. He had a herbal ointment which did wonders, but it seemed a mockery that I, who was so soon to be tortured to

death, should be so carefully tended for what was, after all, a minor evil.

"When is my day coming, Costa?" I asked. "It is weary work waiting."

He shook his head.

"It has been longer than I expected," he answered.

"Can that woman do me any harm—with the executioners, I mean? She threatened that she would pay them well if they turned the levers slowly enough."

"You may trust them. They are not made of sentimental stuff, and think more of one man than they do of a hundred women."

I was, apparently, forgotten. Hardly any visitors came to my dungeon, and few people collected on the ramparts. I satisfied myself every morning that Daria was still safe, putting Costa upon his oath to be truthful to me.

"You kept from me the fact that she was to be tortured," I explained.

"Saving you needless pain, not deceiving you. Your knowing could make no difference."

"But in this case?"

"The lady is safe, well, happy, waiting as you are."

"Well and happy are good words to use concerning us," I said. "Could you not arrange to let me speak to her?"

"No. It is impossible."

One evening my dungeon door opened, and Costa entered with O'Ryan and a guard of half a dozen men. I knew at once that something unusual was about to happen. Costa wore a cloak which he only wore on ceremonious occasions, and there was a severity in his manner which he did not ordinarily

assume when he visited me. It was not difficult to guess what this parade meant. I was not long left in doubt.

“By his Majesty’s commands, you will to-morrow be questioned as to your knowledge of various matters his Majesty wishes information upon. You will be questioned in such a manner as shall ensure the truth, and since there is no limit to the mercy his Majesty may extend towards you, you are advised to answer quickly. But since certain knowledge has come to his Majesty’s ears concerning you, that by nature or by artifice your limbs are coarser than is usual with men, and that by reason of this and other causes, you may not be induced to speak truly, the pain able to be inflicted not being sufficient—and since it is considered necessary to strike where there is most likelihood of success—it is his Majesty’s pleasure that you shall first be taken from this dungeon to that of the woman sometimes called the Princess Daria, and shall there be a witness of her questioning.”

He recited the sentence in a monotone without feeling, as though the matter were of no real interest to him. Then he gave a word of command to the guard, who tramped out of the cell and left me alone with Costa and O’Ryan.

“That she-devil is responsible for this.”

He nodded.

“Can I trust the executioners?”

“Yes. She will die quickly, but——”

He paused.

“Well?”

“If this woman, or Count Vasca, or some other special enemy is there, they may say that the executioners bungled at their work, and demand that

others shall deal with you. There would be no time to make friends with them."

"So long as she dies quickly, I care not."

"You are a brave man. I trust all may go well with you."

He held out his hand. I shook it, and thanked him for all he had done. He had indeed been a gentle jailer.

Then O'Ryan held out his hand. I took it for the sake of the past.

"There is a long night before you," said Costa. "Shall I stay with you for a while, or would you sooner be alone?"

At that moment O'Ryan grasped my hand sharply. There was no doubt about it this time. What did he mean?

"I would be alone," I said.

Costa bowed ceremoniously as he left the dungeon, and O'Ryan, as he followed him, turned for an instant, and smiled. I was expected to understand something by the pressure, and by his smile I imagined I had made the right answer to Costa's question.

But, after all, what could the Irishman do for me, even if he really wished to help me at this late hour? To-morrow would not be long in coming, and when it came, who could help me? Only a short night intervened! All hope of escape had long since gone from me. Indeed, I had no desire to escape without Daria. Could I trust the executioners to fulfill their promise? If they kept their word, Daria's sufferings would soon be over, and mine— A sudden fear took possession of me, which made my limbs shake as though the palsy were in them. Death must come,

but the uncertainty of his time and method of coming rob him of half his terrors. I knew the time and method, and why should I not confess that my courage failed me for a while? For an hour—it may have been more—fear shook me. My enemies would have rejoiced could they have spied upon me during that time. Then my will power returned to steady me, and I paced my dungeon until I was sensible of no quiver in the firmness of my steps, until I could have held, extended to the full length of my arm, a glass filled to the brim steadily. Certain that the attack was over, I lay down on my couch hoping to sleep.

I did sleep; how long I cannot tell, but a touch suddenly awoke me.

“Hush!” said a voice in my ear.

The dungeon was pitch dark. I could see no one.

“Who is it?”

“Dennis O’Ryan. I haven’t time to answer many questions. Listen to me. It’s your only chance, and it’s a poor one, but it may just serve.”

“Can I trust you?”

“Trust me, begorra! Haven’t I been working night and day to help you? Hadn’t I got to impress everybody with my hatred of you to make certain that I should be allowed to remain in the fortress? One look of pity, one false move on my part, and I should not have been able to be here to-night.”

“You deceived me,” I said.

“You should have known me better.”

“I may be a fool, but you must forgive me if I am a little skeptical now.”

“My dear fellow, you are a fool. You’ve splendid courage, but you’re deficient in cunning. Listen to

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me. The night you escaped from Yadasara I helped you, though you didn't know it. I led a howling mob after you, it's true, but I led them around every wrong corner I could. I talked loudly about your villainy to me. Had I not done so you would probably have been arrested quietly. As it was, they attempted to do it publicly, and you got the only chance there was of getting away. I did more shouting than running when I followed."

"You are a good actor."

"When you were hard pressed upon the stairs, I rushed at you. They knew that I had an account to settle with you, so let me pass. There was your chance again. It was impossible for us both to get away. It would not have been good for me if you had escaped whilst I was whole in body, so I told you to wound. A less wound that you inflicted would have served, but let it pass."

"I am sorry."

"It turns out for the best. I was left in the city, and since you have been a prisoner, I have been set to help guard you, but not allowed to come near you much, lest I should do you an injury."

"You could have given me some sign."

"With that fat Spaniard looking? Only in the last few days has he ceased to distrust me. Until then he watched me as a cat does a mouse. Costa has sharp eyes."

"He has been a tender jailer."

"Well, I grant he might have been worse. Now listen to me, and put out your hands to feel the things I have with me. It's a poor chance, I grant, but it's the best I can do for you. It has this merit—

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if you fail, you will kill yourself, and that's better than waiting for to-morrow morning."

"That depends."

"Here's a rope," said O'Ryan. "Feel it?—good. I'll put it on the couch, and here's the key of that flagstone in the corner; take it. The rope is a good fifty feet long."

"Only fifty!" I exclaimed.

"When you have opened the slab," he went on, "you will feel a ring in the side of the shoot; fasten the rope securely to it, and let the rope hang down."

"But fifty feet! What is the good of fifty feet of rope?"

"We haven't got a month to argue in," he answered, "but just about ten minutes, so you had better listen. I haven't done as much as I should like to have done, but I've managed to do more than I expected. Below this dungeon is that of the Princess. with fifty feet of rope you can reach it."

"O'Ryan!" I exclaimed.

"It is not easy; but you're athletic enough," he went on. "The slip from this dungeon is only a few feet long. It then joins the main shaft that falls into the river—not quite perpendicularly, but nearly. You must let yourself down by the rope until you come to another slip resembling this, but much longer for the Princess's dungeon, though below this, is not immediately under it. You will find it a difficult climb up, but on your hands and knees you can do it. Are you clear so far?"

"Yes; but will the slab in her cell be unlocked?"

"It will be wide open."

"She knows that I am coming?"

"No. There is the weak spot in my plan. I have

tried to communicate with her, but I have failed. In her excitement she may betray you before you are prepared."

"Prepared for what?"

"She will not be alone when you arrive," he answered. "This is what happened, and the double dealing of others has given us our chance. At Court it is believed that Count Vasca is to marry the Lady Aldrida. They pose as lovers, and, so far as the lady is concerned, she believes that her future is settled. Count Vasca has no intention of marrying her. Not only does he mean to be King in Yadasara, but he means to marry the Princess if he can. His plans have come to a head only now. He has the King's permission to interview the Princess. If he succeeds in obtaining her consent, she is to go free with him this very night. He may use what persuasion he will."

"Then the King wishes to save her?"

"On the contrary, it is only because he feels sure that the Count will fail that he has given his consent. The Count is too powerful to be refused a favor. If he fails, then the Princess suffers to-morrow in the manner you know of. The King has promised Lady Aldrida that. So the Princess will be out of the way, but that is not all. The King has deeper plans. He has only to tell Lady Aldrida what the Count has done to make her hate the Count as much as she now professes to love him. She knows Vasca better than any one else does probably, and if she were to speak, his schemes would fall to pieces like a house of cards. The King is not so easily fooled as they imagine."

"The Count goes to the Princess to-night. He may be there even now."

“He is not. He has an elaborate scheme which is arranged in every detail. He will use persuasion. He will play upon her fears. For that purpose he will unlock the slab to show her the death road she is to take to-morrow. He will probably attempt to take her even without her consent, or he might kill her if she refuses him too contemptuously. He has a passion for her—a real passion, Verrall. For her sake, I believe he would forget all his ambitions.”

“But without her consent, how can he present her to the King?”

“Whether he succeeds or not, he has no intention of going to the King. He will leave the fortress with her, and go straight to the city gate. He will go the way you must have gone the night you escaped. A boat is lying hard by the great rock. He will cross the river, and before dawn will be in the woods which lie to the south. There is a woodcutter’s cottage there, and horses will be waiting for him.”

“He means to leave Drussenland?” I asked.

O’Ryan smiled.

“No. To-morrow the revolution will commence. Half the city is Vasca’s already.”

“The Princess will not consent,” I said, after a pause.

“Yet Vasca must succeed to-night,” said O’Ryan slowly; “the Vasca I am thinking of. The Count will be alone with the Princess, and will have the keys of the dungeon. You will enter, and you will kill him. Take his cloak, and hat, and sword. Then drag his body to the slip, and let it go. Use expedition. Open the door, and walk out of the fortress. Do not speak if you can help it; your voice might betray you. As you go through the city you will be

watched, but have no fear; they will be watching to see that you come to no harm. They are your friends. The city gate will open for you at a sign, and you are free to make the best of your way to the woods. Get to the woods speedily."

"That will not be difficult. I went to the wood-cutter's cottage before. The woman there hid me when I was pursued."

"That is good. You will not lose time in finding it. I shall be waiting there with horses. You may depend that they shall be fleet ones."

"And afterwards?"

"Unless you are delayed, by dawn we should be well on our way towards the place where you entered this infernal country. We must trust to luck to find the way out. If we fail, and are hard pressed, we will just put our horses into full gallop for the first ravine that offers, and leap into space and another world. We must not be retaken. Now do you thoroughly understand?"

"Yes. When do I go?"

"You will presently hear the guard changed in the corridor without. Then tie your rope securely, and descend. Here is a sword. See that you do not drop it as you go down. Do not go before your time, or you will ruin everything. Don't be too courteous with Vasca. I see no need to face him if you can conveniently run him through the back."

"He might kill me."

"Exactly. I don't want you to run any risk," replied O'Ryan. "Once he hired an assassin to stab you in the dark; just remember that, and slay him like you would a mad dog. Now I must go."

"Shall I be visited again to-night?"

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“No.”

“The raising of the slab will not make much noise, will it?”

“Raise it carefully, and you will not be heard. Now, good-bye, and good luck.”

We grasped each other’s hands, and he left me.

It was a weary waiting for me. The difficulties before me seemed to grow to huge proportions as I sat idly thinking about them. There was not one difficulty to overcome, but a long series of them. In any one of them the slightest false step would mean ruin not only to me, but also to the woman I loved. In the dark I tested the rope foot by foot, and I examined the blade which O’Ryan had left with me. It was a keen weapon, evenly balanced in the hand, a weapon to honestly fight a man with. To run a man through the back with it seemed putting it to an ill use. It would doubtless be safer to take O’Ryan’s advice; but could I do it? It was too much like murder.

Suddenly I heard the guard changed. The time had come, and my heart beat faster. I waited until the sound of the men’s measured tread had died away down the corridor, and then I went to the slab. A dozen fears took hold of me at that moment. O’Ryan might have given me the wrong key. The rope might be too short. The Count might have changed his plans and time of coming. Indeed, my hand trembled as I put the key into its hole.

It turned easily, and the next moment I had raised the slab.

The dungeon was pitch dark. I had to be careful not to slip into the hole. I could hear the swish of

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the river far below me—a noisy sound it was, coming up through the shaft.

I found the ring, and to it I tied the rope. I tested the security of the knots at least half a dozen times before I let the rope go. It swung out to its length with a jerk. I fastened the sword tightly round me, and then I stood for a moment. It was a short prayer I muttered—too short, perhaps, for the great matter I was entering upon, but it was an earnest one.

Once more I pulled the rope, and could detect no give in the knots or in the ring. Then I sat upon the edge of the slip, and grasping the rope with both hands, let myself go, dropping to my full length.

It was the way that only dead men took, yet I, a living one, was about to take it.

CHAPTER XXXIV**HOW THE COUNT CRUSHED HIS ENEMIES**

It had seemed pitch dark in the dungeon, yet I hung in a greater blackness, and could discern the opening above my head. I wasted no time now I had begun my journey. It was simply a matter of sliding down the slip, and steadying myself by the rope. This was easy enough. It was a different thing altogether when my legs went out into space, and I was hanging down the main shaft. It was not a perpendicular wall, but this hardly made the descent less difficult. I had to keep myself away from the side with my feet, and go very slowly down. Even then I could not altogether prevent my hands from being grazed as the rope jerked with every foot I descended. I was most anxious not to injure my hands, as there was grave work for them to do shortly.

I am not a nervous climber, and I never doubted the ability of my arms to support my weight, but my nerves were not at their normal strength. I had been a prisoner for a long time; I had gone through terrible excitement, and the contemplation of what I was about to attempt naturally strung my nerves up to an intense pitch. I was painfully conscious of the water booming dismally below me, and that only the strength of my muscles and of a rope were between

me and a terrible death. I tried not to think of it—tried to concentrate my mind on the work immediately in hand, and as so constantly happens when a great effort is needed to concentrate the thoughts, I found myself wandering, thinking of all sorts of things with which just now I had nothing to do. As I went slowly down, I remembered how I had promised to find the treasure that lay hidden in Drussenland—had even led them to suppose that it was buried in the great stronghold of the country, in this very fortress. I laughed to myself; yet there were many niches in these blank walls where it might be hidden. Long ago, perhaps, some venturesome spirit had taken his life in his hands, and gone the same journey as I was upon, although not upon the same errand. He may have gone to hide a treasure, and I—I found no jewels or golden pieces, yet in Drussenland I found a treasure.

I went more warily. I must have traversed nearly the fifty feet of rope; yet my feet had always met the wall. I had come to no other hole, no other slip joining the main shaft. As this fact flashed across me, I wondered for a moment if O’Ryan had deceived me. I dared not dwell upon the thought. No, I had deceived myself. I could not yet have come down fifty feet. Hand over hand I went down, first feeling the rope with my feet to make certain that I was not at the end of it, then feeling the wall, not to miss the opening I sought for. Hand over hand, then my feet dangling below me—there was no more rope. For an instant I felt inclined to let go and fall to death, so ending my troubles. Then I went up hand over hand in desperate haste, and having got the rope between my knees again, I hung, swinging, and steadied

myself to think. Either I had missed the hole or O'Ryan was mistaken; the rope was not long enough. Perhaps it was because the first solution was the most acceptable that I believed it to be the correct one. I took courage and climbed upwards, stretching my legs to right and left searching for the hole. I might have missed it even then had I not heard a sound that made me listen intently. Yes, it was distinct from the hissing of the water below me, the murmur of a man's voice. Was it above me in the dungeon I had escaped from? If so, I had only to wait a few moments. I should feel the rope jerked, or else it would be cut, and so an end to me. I hung, waiting, and still in a dull monotone the voice went on. Suddenly a little below me, and to my left, the rocky wall seemed to grow luminous, a flickering light that shone for a moment, then died, then shone again.

"Is that a good way out of life?"

The voice sounded low, yet the words were distinct. The light flickered, and then slowly went out. I lowered myself to the level where it had been, and then, holding the rope with one hand, worked my way along the face of the wall with the other. I made slow progress, but presently I grasped the side of the slip. Cautiously I felt for the floor of it with my foot. After some minutes I succeeded in finding it, but it was, if anything, at a sharper angle than the slip from my dungeon. How to get a footing upon it was a matter for consideration. As it was, I had to hold on to the side of the slip to prevent the rope swinging back with me, for instead of being directly under my dungeon, as O'Ryan had led me to suppose, this opening was a good ten feet to one side of it. Fortunately the walls of it were rough hewn, and

clinging to the rope with my knees and feet, I managed to drag myself inwards with my hands, my nails and fingers suffering in the operation. By letting the rope slide between my knees gradually as I advanced, I brought myself to the floor some feet from the edge of the slip. I chose the spot, and then dropped forwards on my hands and knees. The released rope swung back and was gone. There was no return now. I had dropped very cautiously, and all my energy had been centered on what I was doing. Now I was aware that above me, at the top of the steep ascent, there was a light. O'Ryan had not deceived me. The trap in the dungeon was open. No doubt it was the fact of some one approaching the trap with a torch a few moments before which had enabled me to discover the opening.

I lay quite still for some minutes and listened. I could hear the sound of voices, but I could not catch the words. They were speaking very low, or it seemed so from my position, so low, indeed, that I wondered if Daria, terrified at the prospect of to-morrow, were inclined to yield to this villain's pleading. If she did, how could I blame her? I was a doomed man, a fast prisoner, so far as she knew. With me no happiness could be in store for her. Might not this consideration make her yield at last to save herself from a hideous death? Why was I wasting the precious moments? I began to draw myself up cautiously, taking care that my sword should not clatter upon the stone. More than once I slipped backwards; but at last I was so close to the opening that I could see into the dungeon. Had I raised my head a little too high, I might have been seen; but I was careful. I steadied myself by the

side of the wall, hardly daring to breathe, yet feeling confident that I should not be discovered, unless I betrayed myself by a sound.

There was a pillar in the middle of the dungeon, supporting the low-vaulted roof, and in a ring in the pillar a torch was fixed. A breeze from the open trap caught the flame, making it flicker weirdly and cast strange shadows. On a couch at the foot of the pillar sat Daria, her hands clasped in her lap. Whether she was pale or not, I could not see, for the burning torch cast a red glow upon her face. She hardly seemed to listen to Vasca, who was standing close to her, talking rapidly. He was evidently just finishing some argument as I began my silent part in the conversation.

"I have been ambitious. I have deceived you. I crave your pardon. I have not done it for myself alone. Then you might use harsh words to me. I have done it for you. My love has spurred me on. A man stops not to think overmuch when love grips his heart. You rewarded me not with a word or look more kind than you gave to other knights, when I served you. I have taken strange means, perhaps, to make you think of me."

"That is true, Count Vasca. Very strange means."

How calmly she spoke.

"I was justified. You are a strange woman, not easily wooed or won. Have I not risked life, honor, everything for you?"

"Have you?"

"Aye—everything."

"I asked no sacrifice."

"You should not blame."

"Have I accused you?" she asked indifferently.

"Your manner has. You accuse me, knowing but half the tale. Look you, opportunities came to me, and in desperation I seized them. Outside Yadasara I was powerless, but in the city I had many friends. They would make me King. It has been your ambition to reign in Yadasara. I remembered that; but alone I knew you could not do so. These warriors are of rougher sort than served you, men who care not to own allegiance to a woman. Their King must be a warrior—a leader who can ride with them knee to knee to the charge, and can wield as strong or a stronger sword than any of them. I boast not, but in me they found such a leader. Now your ambition may be realized."

"You are not a king."

"To-night, no; to-morrow—" he broke off excitedly. "Say that you will be Queen of Yadasara, my Queen, and now, this instant, this dungeon door is open to you. In a few hours you shall have the nation at your feet craving your favors. Your word shall bring death or grant life. Your will shall be law in Drussenland, and he who speaks, the humblest yet the happiest of your slaves."

"A pleasing prospect, most easily spoken of."

He missed the sarcasm in her voice.

"It is true. To-morrow, at this time, I shall be King. The last obstacle is overthrown."

"You play a double game, Count Vasca," she said severely. "You betrayed me, whom you professed to serve; you would now betray him to whom you have transferred your allegiance."

"For your sake," he answered. "Do not forget that."

"For my sake?"

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“You are a Princess in Drussenland; you would be Queen. As your knight, I could but draw a good sword in your service; as a King, I can give you my hand to help you mount the throne you covet.”

“I have ceased to covet a throne. To-morrow I die.”

“Never by my will. I am here to save you. By the King’s permission I am here. If I can win your consent to be my wife, he has promised you life and freedom. Even so far is Count Vasca powerful. But I have a far greater aim. Consent, and we will leave this dungeon and the city. Before nightfall to-morrow Yadasara will be in our hands, the King our prisoner. Even in this dungeon shall he lodge if so you will it. It wants but the sharp note of a trumpet to call half the city to my banner. Whether you live or die cannot alter that now.”

“Is it not dangerous to confess such treason to me?”

“I love you. In love there is no treason.”

“You love me?”

She had listened to him and answered him without raising her eyes until now. As she asked the question, she looked straight at him.

“As my life,” he answered.

And, to do him full justice, I believe he spoke truly.

“Then let the trumpet sound at daybreak. Revolution will shake the city, and I shall be saved.”

He paused a moment.

“The fortress is not yet in my hands, else had I not been forced to gain the King’s permission before I came to you. I cannot save you unless you come

with me. From this dungeon the King protects us, afterwards my friends—your subjects.”

“And Sir Verrall?”

“Him I cannot save. I would have done so if I could, but it is impossible. My followers demand his death, as they do the death of all those who have been brought into this land to fight for hire. He is a foreigner—a brave man, I grant—still, a foreigner. Why trouble about him?”

“You are afraid to spare him.”

“Afraid! That is a strange word to use of one who has so long carried his life in his hand for your sake.”

“Of one who turned his hand against those who honored me,” she said quietly.

“I have pleaded for the knight’s life, but to no purpose. My followers demand his death.”

“You have so much power, it should be sufficient to demand his life. Ah, Count Vasca! it is easy to speak a tale when there is no one nigh to proclaim it false.”

“You would not bring such an accusation against me if you knew all. I am powerless in this matter.”

“Yet you will be King to-morrow, so you tell me.”

“Aye, as surely as that torch begins to burn low and shows that time clamors for your answer.”

He spoke in a different tone. I perceived that his patience was nearly exhausted.

“My answer is no,” she said firmly.

“Remember to-morrow.”

“Could any one have less difficulty in remembering it than I?”

“The rack is a cruel companion, Princess. Were

I the greatest villain in Drussenland, yet should I be a gentler comrade than the rack."

"The rack kills the body. A villain would break my heart."

"Time is meaningless when in the rack's embrace," he answered. "Every second is an hour when agony thrills through every nerve. You may live for hours, and hours in such a case mean a lifetime."

"Yet I shall die honestly, loving a true man. Can a lifetime, be it of hours or years, be better spent?"

"You love this foreign dog?"

"As my own soul."

She rose to her feet as she said it.

My time had nearly come. Cautiously I felt that my sword was loose in its scabbard. The Count's back was towards me, yet could I not take O'Ryan's advice. Though my enemy would be an assassin, yet could not I. Should I be less courageous than the woman who loved me, who preferred to suffer a horrible death rather than be false to me? I should be unworthy of such love were I to strike from behind.

"The torch burns low. Think once more."

I wondered how he intended to take her without her consent, as O'Ryan had said he might do. Would he attempt to drug her?

Suddenly he drew his sword. Was he about to wound her, and thus secure her?

Still I waited.

He stirred the torch into a brighter flame with the point of his weapon.

"See, I make the time as long as possible," he said defiantly.

He appeared now not to care what her answer was. He had pleaded for favor, now his action offered one.

"Though all the torches in Drussenland were here, and each one were lighted from the dying flame of another, yet that time would not suffice to make me change," said Daria slowly. "In a few hours I shall be free from this land of traitors, free in a land where only honest men and women are, in a land where love and mercy are as twin sisters walking together, and where there is peace past all the priests have told us of. There with a true knight shall I walk. I believe, I know, that the God who looks down upon us will give me strength to bear what is before me. A weak woman in the protection of an all-strong God can defy the world and every pain it holds, as I defy it and them. Go, Count Vasca, go. You are a double traitor. See that I do not betray you when the rack cracks these limbs of mine."

"I will see to that," he answered harshly. "Your folly shall neither kill my ambition nor make me careless. Perhaps it is for my own safety—perhaps pity for you, I hardly know which—but the rack shall not hurt you. You shall make an easier end. There lies the death road. You shall take it to-night."

He threw his cloak back from his shoulder to give his sword-arm freedom. Whether he meant to kill her I shall never know. My time had come.

Daria sprang towards him.

"For that I thank you. You could do me no greater service."

She clutched the bosom of her dress with both hands and tore it open, showing her white flesh.

"Strike, and strike deep!"

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His moment of surprise was my moment of opportunity. I drew myself up, and stood in the dungeon, sword in hand. Daria turned with a low cry. The Count with an oath pushed her aside, so that she fell upon the couch, and rushed at me. I remembered that the trap was just behind me, and I stepped aside as our blades met.

“You must crush your enemy now, Count. It is your last chance,” I hissed. “The road you were to take to-night, I take. The death way is for you.”

He did not answer. His eyes were fixed on mine, his sword flashed with mine. It was to be a duel to the death. We both knew that. He tried to force me back towards the hole. I tried to make him change ground with me. We neither of us succeeded, yet he had the advantage, for the flickering torch was before me, and spoilt my sight somewhat. Twice, thrice, he made a sudden effort to finish the matter, once almost breaking through my guard. My hands were sore with my climbing. My weapon was not so certain in my hand as I could have wished. Again he made an effort, which nearly succeeded. The point of his weapon touched my arm, and the blood showed. The Count smiled. The next moment I had touched him, and there ensued a fierce encounter for a few moments. I succeeded in getting round him. Now his back was towards the trap, the torch-light in his eyes. Now the advantage was with me. Whether it was the light that troubled him, or that his courage failed him, I do not know, but he fought less freely. Time after time he only just managed to keep my point from his breast, and unconsciously he drew nearer to the hole. Once or twice his eyes left mine for an instant—a bad sign—but it did not

make me careless. Not for a moment did I forget the man with whom I had to deal.

Suddenly he attacked me more fiercely than before. "King!" I heard him utter between his teeth. Well could I understand him. His schemes were ripe. To-morrow Yadasara would be his if only he could slay me. His swordsmanship was not equal to his ferocity, or perhaps he underrated my skill. I watched him, and I grew calmer. I waited until his heel was at the edge of the trap. Now I prepared to strike and end it, but once more he escaped me. He forced me back across the dungeon until my foot touched the wall, and he laughed. It was a strange laugh, such as few men laugh, for it ended in a gurgling sigh almost like the sound a pipe gives as the last of the water runs out. For the end had come. My blade had passed right through him. He threw up his arms and staggered back, falling beside the hole.

I went to him.

"He is dead."

"Clinton!"

Daria was beside me.

"My love," I said, kissing her, "forget that name for a while. We will go. I know the road. The danger is over."

"But you, you——"

"I am the Count for to-night."

I took the cloak from the dead man and threw it round me. I took his sword and put it on instead of my own, and I drew his hat well over my eyes.

"Here is the key," I said, drawing it from the cloak. "Stay. In case they should enter the dungeon

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when we are gone, and should find that—it would betray us.”

I took the dead man by his limp arms, and drew him to the edge of the trap. Then I let him go, and he slid noiselessly out of sight.

“Now come.”

Her arm was in mine, and I was fitting the key in the lock, when there was a roar of voices in the corridor without.

“Vasca! The traitor! The traitor, Vasca!”

“The King!” whispered Daria.

I, too, thought I recognized the King’s voice.

A thundering knock came at the door.

“Open in the King’s name!”

“We are lost,” said Daria calmly.

I drew my sword and threw off the cloak. At least I might die fighting.

“Clinton.”

“My love?”

“Kiss me.”

“Open, open!” they shouted without.

“Kiss me.”

I kissed her, one long kiss.

“Now kill me,” she said.

Perhaps the request put the thought into my head.

“You do not fear death?”

“No.”

“Not death with me?”

“Better with you if it could be so.”

“It can. That way.”

I pointed to the trap.

“Only dead men take it, they say, and lie still in the river-bed. Yet one dead man rose to the surface. We might rise alive. It is a poor chance, but if death

comes it will find us in each other's arms. It is better than waiting for to-morrow."

She shuddered a little. Then she took my hands. "I am ready," she said.

"Quickly!"

The knocks upon the dungeon door were continuous. They no longer cried "Open!"; they were breaking the door down.

I sat down on the edge of the trap, even on the spot where a few moments before the dead Count had rested. It was a strange mockery, the dead man first, the living afterwards.

"Sit beside me," I said to Daria. "Now put your arms round me so, now you feet between mine, so. Do not struggle. To fall straight is our only chance. My darling, I love you, I love you!"

Our lips met.

"It is time. In another moment the door will be in."

I shuffled over the edge as I spoke, holding with one hand.

"You are ready?"

"Yes!"

"Now!"

I let go my hold, and we slipped downwards.

CHAPTER XXXV**THE WAY THAT DEAD MEN TAKE**

THE brave woman in my arms uttered no sound as we went downwards, slowly at first, but quickening our pace almost immediately. I felt her arms tighten round me a little, that was all. I had said that possibly we might rise to the surface alive, but I did not for a moment expect it. We might rise, probably should, sooner or later, locked still, perhaps, in each other's arms, to be the sport of those currents, even as the dead man was that night I had escaped from Yadasara. I had no hope of life, but the death towards which we rushed was a far easier one than the morrow would have brought us. And we were together. Surely half the bitterness of death is the parting. I thought of Aldrida's words, how we should lie together in the river-bed. Partly would her words come true, but we had escaped the diabolical horrors she had prepared for us.

It is difficult now to tell what my sensations were as we slid towards the main shaft, whether, indeed, I had any sensations at all. When a man lives to look back upon some terrible danger he has passed through, he is apt to believe that such-and-such thoughts and fears were his at the time, whereas they have really come afterwards, have accreted to the episode by reason of the oft-telling or much-thinking

of the tale. He unconsciously draws upon his imagination. As a matter of fact, thought is practically paralyzed at such a moment. But one thing I am certain I did remember, and if at first there had been a faint hope that we might live, this memory effectually killed it. The main shaft, although not quite perpendicular, was at a sharp angle from the slip. At the end of the slip we should shoot out, and although we should not fall direct into the water, we should strike the shaft many feet lower down probably, a worse fate even than the other; but the worst fate of all we had left behind, and we had cheated our enemies. I must have smiled, I think, as I thought of it.

Then we shot over. Not a sound came from Daria. We went over as we had started to slide, I think, feet first. I suppose, if a man has a moment to think when falling, his natural effort would be to double himself up. Neither of us could do that. We so held each other that practically we fell extended to full length. Sometimes I have thought that this fact saved us, but it is impossible to say. Of one thing I am certain—clinging to some one helps a fall. It is like having a support. Had my rope been longer, I should probably have descended lower than I did in my search for the opening, and I should have made a discovery which would have been useful. The main shaft, although nearly perpendicular at first, went at a steadier incline some feet below the slip. It was steep, too steep for anybody thrown there to lodge upon it, but it was an incline—the body would slide down, not fall.

I do not remember whether I was conscious of striking the top of the rocky incline or not, but I

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believe I was. We must have struck it at an angle which saved our limbs. I was conscious of being still whole in body. My arm protected Daria's head. My own, I suppose, I had sense enough to raise a little. The way was rough and uneven. I have thought since that this shaft was originally a strata of softer material in the heart of the rock, and that those who had originally made this death-way had followed it, since the working was easy. It is the only explanation I can find for the fact that after falling almost sheer for the first few feet, it should suddenly change. Possibly nobody in Yadasara knew how the shaft fell. It had been built centuries ago, and it was knowledge hardly worth the remembering, since that way only dead men took.

Down! Down! Faster and faster. Still feet first, I believe. Some moments I feel sure I was conscious, at others I was not. I seem to remember that our speed increased, that loose dust got into my fast-closed eyes. I seemed to cling closer to Daria as if in some way she were protecting me. I seem to remember hearing the sound of the swirling water coming nearer and nearer until it roared like continuous thunder, and then a swift plunge to death.

Then came a blank. I have no recollection whatever of what happened from the moment we plunged into the water until I awoke suddenly, out of a faint, it may have been, to feel a cold wind upon my face, and to draw into my lungs half-a-dozen long breaths of it. They were drawn in rapid succession, and then I felt the water close over my head again. I put out my arms to struggle, and a weight began to slip from me. I was fully conscious in a moment, and closed one arm again only just in time to prevent Daria

slipping from my grasp. I had forgotten her—proof enough how deep my faint had been, although, perchance, it was of short duration. With my other arm I lashed out, and we rose to the surface. How the end of that awful journey had been accomplished, I do not know, nor from what point in the great rock we had shot into the river. Above me was a black heaven, sparsely studded with stars, around me swirling and hissing waters, and in my arms a dead woman, or I thought so. A sigh drawn forth by the cold night air that fanned her wet cheek relieved me. She was not dead. We had risen to the surface, alive. Surely now the danger was past. The hissing waters nearly covering me again, warned me that at least there was one more struggle. Alone I had only just succeeded in saving myself that other time; how could I hope to do it now with this woman in my arms? We were close under the great rock, and I recollected that O’Ryan had said a boat lay there ready for Count Vasca. If I could reach it I could cross the river more easily. I turned upon my back, and with considerable difficulty shifted Daria’s position until she lay upon my chest. With one hand I steadied her, and with the other and my legs I struck out for the shore, close beside the rock. I knew what a terrible struggle it was with the waters in mid-stream. I dared not attempt it, burdened as I was.

Fortunately for us the waters on this side, though running rapidly, had no swirling current in them. I had but to keep afloat and steer myself with my free arm and feet. I approached close to the bank, and there, straining at the painter, was a boat, the water lapping noisily from its bows. Fortunately the rope which held it was long. There was room for

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me to pass underneath it between the bows of the boat and the bank. This I did, and as I shot under I seized the rope. My pull brought the boat towards me, and the water swirling round it, together with a frantic effort on my part, brought me to the bank.

It may be remembered that when before I had crossed the river, I had gone at once into deep water; but here there was a foothold, so that I could stand up, the water to my waist only. I was, indeed, fortunate to hit upon such a place, for it is no easy matter to get into a boat from the water without help, let alone getting an insensible person into it, which is well-nigh impossible.

I had to use force to unclasp Daria's arms from my neck. Perhaps I hurt her a little, for she sighed again. Standing in the water, I lifted her into the boat, then working my hands along the gunwale to the stern, I got in myself. It was a comparatively easy matter to wrench the rope from its fastening on the bank, and the next moment we were drifting sharply down the stream. Not yet had I time to attend to Daria. I seized the oars and worked hard to get across, making slow headway, but drifting a great deal.

Now this has taken a long time to tell; but I suppose many minutes could not have elapsed from the moment I had let go of the edge of the slip from Daria's dungeon to that when I drove the boat's nose into the opposite bank of the river. Of immediate pursuit I had no fear. Probably they would not go to my dungeon until the morning. It was Count Vasca they sought, and those who attempted to follow after him, even if they knew the way he was to take, would have to fight their way out of the city. O'Ryan

had told me that friends were watching over the Count's safety that night. That some one had betrayed Vasca would probably only precipitate the revolution by a few hours. Strange that the success with which the Count had arranged his plans should be the means of our safety.

I lifted Daria from the boat, and laid her on the bank. Then I let the boat go down-stream. It had served me well, it would be ill if its presence should tell tales of me at dawn to-morrow.

Then I looked to Daria, and even as I bent over her she opened her eyes.

"My love!" I whispered. "We are safe."

A smile flickered about her lips for a moment, then her eyes closed. I think she was no longer in a faint. It seemed much like the sleep of a little child to me. I judged that she had, at any rate, sustained no great injury, and I stretched myself. Not until that moment was I aware how exhausted and bruised I was. Whilst the necessity for doing existed, my muscles acted mechanically almost; now my arms dropped in weariness to my side, and the disposition to lie down and sleep came over me. Even the cold night wind and my dripping clothes were insufficient to arouse me.

"I must not fail now," I said to myself. "I must be doing again, and I shall forget the weariness."

It was absolutely necessary to reach the woods as quickly as possible. I took Daria in my arms. How heavy she was! I staggered as I went, and I fear hers was no comfortable resting-place. Many times since have I lifted her up, and thought how light she was.

I should never have reached the woods had I had

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to carry her all the way. She roused up presently, which is hardly to be wondered at, what with the cold and the jolting.

I set her on her feet. She must have been less bruised than I, for she walked more easily than I did.

“Clinton!”

“Daria!”

We went on in silence, our hands clasped. The rest of the journey to the woodcutter’s hut she helped me far more than I helped her. I should have fallen from sheer exhaustion, and slept, had she not been with me.

It was by a lucky chance—no, I have used the words before; it was no chance, it was Providence, surely—by Providence we reached the woods at a point not far from the hut; by Providence, also, that O’Ryan, growing impatient, had come to look for us.

“Clinton, there is some one in the woods close to us,” Daria whispered suddenly.

I was alert in a moment. Approaching danger aroused me as nothing else could. I stood still and listened, and Daria slipped her arm through mine.

There was a shout.

“Vasca!”

For one moment I hesitated. Then I answered—

“O’Ryan!”

There was a crackling of the branches, and the Irishman stood in the path before us.

“You have been long.”

“We are here,” I answered.

“Why, man, that is not like your voice. What has happened?” And he caught hold of me. “Wet, too. The boat was there.”

"Yes, but—we did not come the way we intended. Give me some wine. I am thoroughly done."

I should have fallen had he not held me, but the wine refreshed me.

"A little rest, and I shall be all right," I said.

"Rest must wait. We cannot stay here. Your Highness is wet, too." And O'Ryan offered her the flask. "You must tell me what has happened as we go. I had hoped to be on our way before this. Already the stars are out, and a light bar is across the west. Come, Verrall, one more effort. The horses are close at hand."

"Must we start at once?"

"Yes, at once."

The wine did me good. I took a longer draught of it than would have been good for me at any other time. It drove the cold out, and the blood began to leap through my veins again.

In the saddle I felt a new man, and, with Daria between us, we began our journey.

The day dawned as we galloped onwards. We did not talk. Neither Daria or I had inclination to do so, and O'Ryan, I think, kept his eye upon both of us lest we should become exhausted, and fall from our saddles.

The sun was hot as we began to climb the lower hills, and then O'Ryan called a halt.

"An hour's sleep for you both, and then we will go on again. See, yonder is Yadasara; the sun catches the ramparts on the rock summit. I will watch while you sleep."

Side by side Daria and I lay on the green turf. Her hand fell upon mine, and I clasped it. After that I remembered no more.

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When O'Ryan succeeded in rousing me, I found that Daria was sitting beside me looking almost herself again, though in a somewhat draggled condition.

"I said one hour. You have slept three," said O'Ryan. "I awoke the Princess more easily."

"I am a new man," I said, rising.

"Her Highness has told me how you came last night. Faith, it is a marvel that you are here now."

"We expected death," I answered. "But the death we went to was better than waiting for to-day. Is it time we were in the saddle again?"

"There is little need of hurry, I think. Come to the top of this rising ground."

I followed him. He pointed towards Yadasara.

A great cloud hung over the plain, and as I looked a flame shot up from the midst of the cloud, and then another.

"Fire," I said.

"They are too busy to think of you this day. The revolution has commenced."

"Vasca was to be King to-day."

"Aye. His followers are probably wondering why he does not come to lead them."

I thought of the dungeon-slide, and shuddered. I thought of all those I had known in Drussenland, of Walen, of Jasar, of Costa, and Lady Aldrida. I remembered all I had gone through in this strange land.

"Is it time to mount? It would be hard to be captured now."

Daria's soft voice and her clinging arm recalled me to the present.

"It is time."

"In your country we will forget this."

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"I shall never forget it," I answered. "You will be with me. How shall I ever forget?"

For answer, she laid her head against my shoulder for a moment.

We mounted and sped onwards again, and then I remembered another person in Drussenland.

"O'Ryan, where is Bridget?"

"In Yadasara."

"You would not bring her?"

"She would have been unhappy away from the house by the walls."

"She will miss you."

"For a time—yes."

"Was she your wife?" asked Daria.

"Yes."

"And you have left her?"

"I had no choice, your Highness. Duty came first."

"The duty of saving yourself?" she asked severely.

"You wrong me," he answered readily. "It was my duty to Sir Verrall."

She looked at me, and was silent. But she never quite forgave O'Ryan. He had deserted a woman, she declared. She did not know how capable Bridget was of looking after herself.

So we rode on, and no one followed us. And the further we went, the more our spirits lightened.

It was far on in the afternoon when we reached the spot where I had first entered Drussenland, where O'Ryan had cried "Halt!" so stentoriously, and where I had found that the legend of this country was true. I showed Daria the spot where I had fallen from the mountain pass, the straight black line, though it did not look so now, over which poor

Mustapha had shot out to find a new country—not the one he had for years dreamt of, but a better one, I trust. I showed her where my first night in Drussenland was spent, but we did not stop to enter the cavern. We rode on down the descending road until we were almost at the river's level.

"It was falling water, Verrall," said O'Ryan suddenly. "We must find a fall, then we shall be near to the end of this country."

"We shall find it," I said confidently.

But he did not share my confidence. He looked up at the mountains.

"We must be quick, then, or we shall spend at least one more night in Drussenland."

I suppose it was Daria's presence that prevented him. I had not heard an oath fall from his lips all day. He seldom mentioned the country without one.

The road we were travelling ended almost abruptly. A rocky barrier was before us, into the foot of which the river rushed noisily. A narrow path went up round the side of the rock.

"The water rushes through the rock to somewhere. The path should lead us somewhere, too," said O'Ryan.

"We will try it," I said dismounting.

I helped Daria from her horse, and we began the ascent.

The path ascended for some distance, and then descended sharply. It was difficult to get our horses down. The beasts trembled, and took every step with caution.

"Falling water," I said presently.

Daria and O'Ryan listened, and nodded.

As we rounded the rock the sound increased. It

increased every step we took, and suddenly the path widened, and we were standing upon a rocky platform. In front sheer rock rose far above us; behind, save for the narrow path we had traversed, was rock; to our right—rock, to our left—falling water. It leapt out from the rock above us in a solid mass. We could hear that it fell far below us, but where we could not see. Yet the noise was deafening.

“I see no way out here,” said O’Ryan, “and it’s a noisy place to spend the night in.”

“I see no way either,” I answered. “There is one consolation: if they come after us, they will hardly follow us here.”

So far as we could judge, we were standing midway between where the water leapt from the rock to where it touched the ground below.

Daria had not spoken. Now she drew my attention to the fact that the water fell clear of the rock from which it sprang.

“May there not be a way behind it?” she suggested.

“I remember how close it sounded when I came into Drussenland,” said O’Ryan excitedly. “Your Highness may be right.”

“Were you mounted when you came?” I asked.

“No; on foot, but there were horses. We were led up a path, and then our eyes were bandaged. I remember it was a short journey after that.”

“This must be the entrance to Drussenland,” said Daria.

“Faith, it’s the way out we’re after,” O’Ryan returned.

Further search showed us a cavern which was hidden by the jutting rock. It turned and twisted for a few yards, and then opened upon a narrow pathway

which crossed the rock behind the falling water. I say a narrow path, so it was. I have traversed narrower, but with sheer rock on one side and falling water for a wall on the other, any path would look too narrow for safety.

"This is the way, Clinton," said Daria.

There was a catch in her breath as she spoke. I did not wonder at it.

"The longer we think about it, the harder it will become," said O'Ryan practically. "I'll lead the way; if I pitch over you must decide whether it is worth while to chance the crossing."

He was right; looking at a difficulty never made it easier. He took his horse firmly by the bridle, and started. Daria went next, and I followed. It was a perilous journey, more perilous by reason of the horses. But we accomplished it, and a short climb brought us out upon the path where Mustapha and I had commenced our journey to this land of legend.

"Is this your country, Clinton?" Daria whispered.

"No, my love. We have a long journey yet before us, but there are no dangers here. Those are past."

We mounted our horses, and clattered along the road to Brâyle.

It was strange entering the low door of the inn. The familiar scene made the time seem short since the first time I had entered it. A wood fire was crackling on the hearth, and round the table, drinking their thin wine, sat three men.

They rose as I entered, a scared look upon their faces.

"We thought you were dead; killed, perhaps, by that madman, Mustapha," said the landlord.

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"No. I am alive, you see, and hungry. Have you entertainment for three hungry travellers?"

He called his wife. He was a lazy fellow, this landlord.

"And Mustapha?" questioned one of his companions.

I recognized him.

"Ah, my friend, you do not know all the paths upon the mountains. The legend was true. Supper first, the tale afterwards."

"Better leave the tale until to-morrow," said O'Ryan. "Faith, it's not only supper I want, but a bed."

There was bustle in the inn that night; but shortly I told them the tale before I went to bed.

"But the treasure?" said the landlord, with glistening eyes, as I finished.

He would not have understood had I told him of Daria, so I answered shortly, as I rose from the fire-side, with a yawn—

"Treasure! There was no treasure."

CHAPTER XXXVI

FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO CIVILIZATION

DID I not say when I commenced this history that I should hardly believe it myself had I not one incontestable proof of the truth of it always before me?

If I doubt, as, indeed, I almost do sometimes, I have only to look at my wife. How else would Daria be with me had I not passed through these adventures in Drussenland?

Daria! My little wife! How well she fits her English home! Yet how strange it was to her at first! It took her long to learn that in England I was only a private gentleman, that she was only Mrs. Clinton Verrall, a person of some importance, certainly, but not a Princess. She could not understand why my Queen should think so little of such a brave knight as I was.

And then her wonder at all she saw! On this theme I could write a sequel to this history. It had been strange enough slipping from civilization into the Middle Ages, but of the Middle Ages we have read in books. What must it have been for one leaping from the Middle Ages to civilization? There were no books to help Daria.

But the sequel will not be written, I fancy. It could only be humorous, and even were I capable of writing such a history, with a smile in every line of

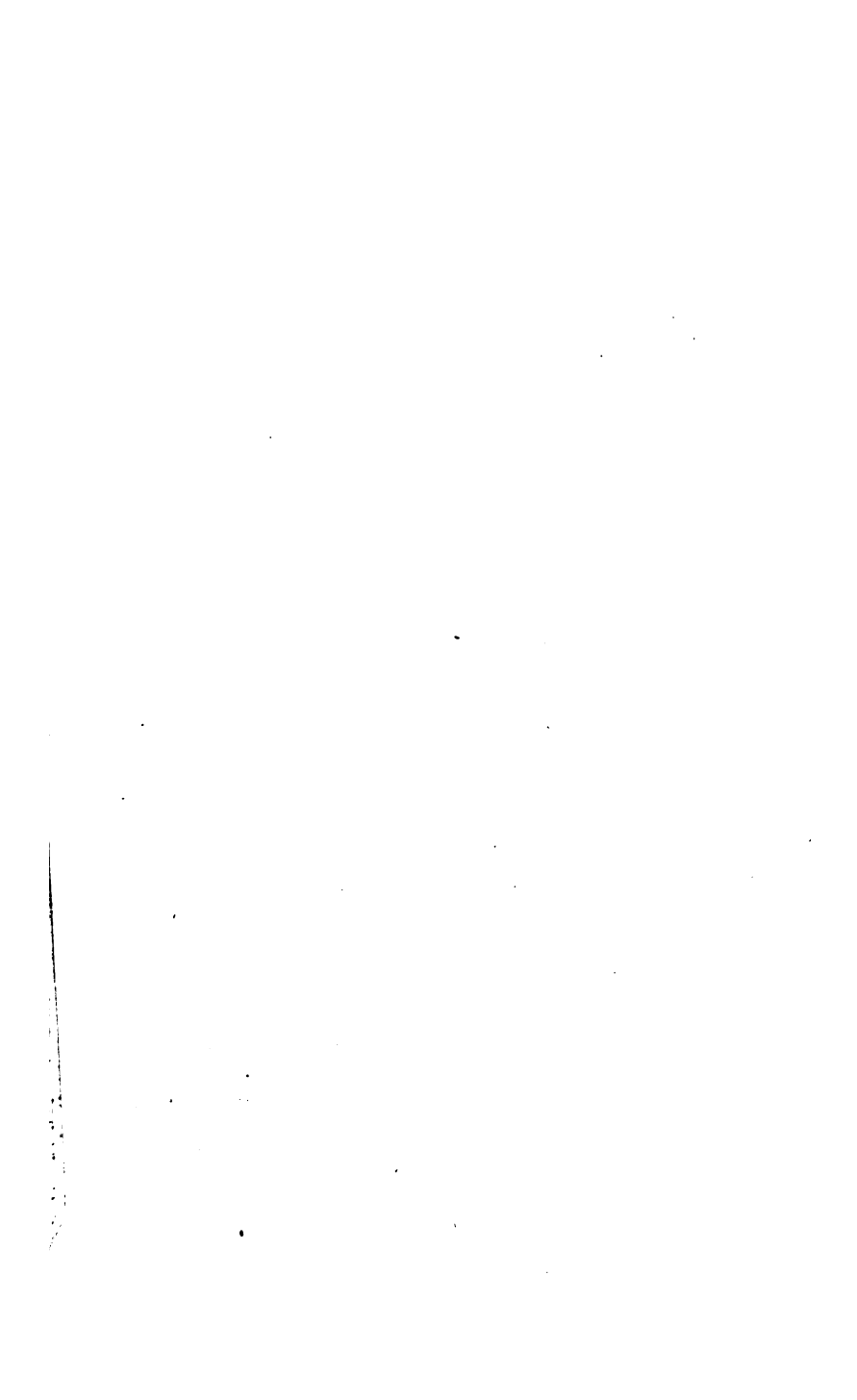
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it, I should not do so. I could not have my little wife laughed at. I have laughed at her myself sometimes, it is true—I did when she saw her first train steaming into a station; but then I am a privileged person.

Of O’Ryan I have seen little since we parted with him in London. Twice only, I think, has he been to visit us, and he is the only one who persists in addressing Daria as “Your Highness.” He has not forgotten Drussenland.

Nor have we quite. It was a fancy of Daria’s, and I humored her. In my library hangs a picture of myself clad in armor, which I had to borrow from a costumier for the occasion, and underneath is a little tablet fixed into the bottom of the frame. Some day the reader and I may become acquainted, and I will show it to him. And the legend on the tablet runs thus: “Sir Verrall, Knight of the Silver Star.”

THE END.





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